

Gateway Journalism REVIEW

Founded 1970 as St. Louis Journalism Review



AI in the newsroom and classroom How artificial intelligence is already making news

Also in this issue:

An in-depth look at the new media literacy requirement in Illinois schools

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OpenAI CEO Sam Altman

Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Can the First Amendment keep up with the deluge of machine created information?

By William H. Freivogel

The point of the First Amendment is to protect expression people hate - Nazi protesters in Skokie, anti-war protesters burning the American flag, KKK hooligans in an Ohio farmfield, Christian fundamentalists protesting the burial of American soldiers.

Tolerance for the speech we despise is the lesson of 232 years of the First Amendment. Yet the nation is awash today in public attacks on free speech and intellectual freedom from right, left and center.

Conservatives - some of whom picture themselves in the Oval Office - ban "woke" ideology, "critical race theory," drag queen

story hours, library books that mention diversity or sexual content and the popular TikTok social platform used by 150 million Americans. They empty school library shelves in Florida, want to end medical treatment for transgender adolescents and bar trans athletes from women's sports.

At the same time, liberal law students recently shouted down a Trump judge at Stanford law school fortified by the moral support of a dean. Tirien Steinbach, dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, asked appeals Judge Kyle Duncan if his words were "worth the squeeze," given how upsetting they were to protesters. Meanwhile, inside newsrooms from the

New York Times to Washington University's Student Life, reporters face dissension from their colleagues and trans rights activists for reporting on criticism of transgender medical treatments.

If this weren't confusing enough, Artificial Intelligence has entered the public sphere with soulless machines programmed with more facts than any human can learn. How long will these genius machines have patience with the relatively stupid people they serve?

The CEO of the most eye-catching AI experiment, ChatGPT, is a young man with whom some St. Louisans grew up, Sam Altman. He is remembered at John Burroughs as the student in the early 2000s who persuaded teachers to put up "Safe Space" signs for gays and who came out in his senior year. Altman dropped out of Stanford after realizing he was learning more from poker than the AI/robotics lab where he worked, according to a profile in the New York Times.

GJR devotes much of this issue to exploring what AI may mean for journalism and education.

Jackie Spinner, our editor, interviews educators who think it makes more sense to use AI as a tool to improve learning and journalism rather than branding it as cheating.

Mark Sableman, one of St. Louis' most prominent media lawyers, asks what could go wrong once AI is added to the media world. "Everything," he says, especially if AI is used as "reader ready content," untouched by human hands.

Sableman's point is illustrated by one of our stories that was written by ChatGPT itself. We asked it to tell us about Altman's background in St. Louis. The 500-word response claimed Altman and his wife had made a major contribution to LaunchCode and he graduated from Stanford in 2007. But Altman is gay and did not graduate from Stanford. In a separate piece, ChatGPT identified Spinner, the GJR editor, as a professor from Mizzou rather than Columbia College Chicago.

Altman, in his interviews, recognizes dangers of AI while making soaring claims about its importance to humanity.

In the Times' story, Altman pointed out he shared a birthday with Robert Oppenheimer, leader of the Manhattan Project and quoted him to the effect that, "Technology happens because it is possible" - a plain statement of technological determinism.

He went on to say, his company could "solve some of our most pressing problems, really increase the standard of life and also

figure out much better uses for human will and creativity." He thinks OpenAI could capture much of the world's wealth and redistribute it to ameliorate poverty.

Altman voiced similarly sweeping conclusions in an interview with radio personality Charlie Brennan in 2021 reminiscing about his childhood in Clayton when he walked through the back gate to Captain Elementary School.

He said, "We started OpenAI because we thought this thing that was happening of us....like humanity, building digital intelligence is going to be one of the most important milestones in human history and it could go either really well or really badly and we did not think there was enough effort to make sure it happens safely and in a way that humans broadly benefit.

"It's very hard to think about what the world is going to be like when we have superhuman capacity inside a computer, computers that can learn anything...that can think billions of times faster, smarter than the smartest human on any topic simultaneously and that eventually become self-aware and have their own desires and will and none of the limitations that humans have...

"This is going to be a bigger technological revolution than the three great ones so far, the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution and the computer revolution all put together....Everything is going to change."

Altman may be right, but his claims sound exaggerated.

Altman's dreams are reminiscent of the now tattered hopes that existed around the turn of the century that computer technology and the smart phone would democratize the media by putting a printing press in every person's pocket. Comments at the end of online stories would bring immediate accountability to journalists who wrote distorted stories.

The promised land didn't arrive. Yes, citizen journalists captured big stories such as the Ferguson death of Michael Brown, yet some of the stories they sent the world were mythical, such as the Hands up, Don't shoot story line. And the comments at the end of stories often became forums for racism and misogyny.

Lockerdome, renamed Decide, is a current example of how a crown jewel of St. Louis tech startups can end up fueling disinformation. Paul Wagman lays out how it has helped monetize dozens of sites promoting election denial, white supremacy, Christian nationalism, Covid skepticism, climate-change denial and other far-right passions and fantasies. And the St. Louisans who operate the company won't even offer a public explanation of their behavior.

Meanwhile, a young generation of

smart phone natives stares into their devices while losing personal contact, many becoming increasingly isolated and depressed with the inches-high representation of the world that plays out on their screens.

Today's parents - and grandparents - face a daunting task of protecting the next generation from the screens that seduce them into electronic isolation and despondency.

Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., has a point when he talks about passing a law to cut off teen access to social media platforms until 16, although such a law couldn't be enforced.

Hawley seems mostly intent, though, on making headlines for his obvious pursuit of the White House.

Recently he got into a floor debate with fellow Republican Rand Paul, a libertarian from Kentucky, when he asked for unanimous consent to ban the TikTok app. Paul refused to give his consent and pointed out that the law violated the First Amendment. (Ironically, the only reason I saw the exchange is that it came across my TikTok feed.)

Hawley claimed TikTok wasn't free speech because it made private search data of Americans available to the Chinese Communist Party and that was an act of espionage. Paul pointed out that there was no proof that was happening to the data and that U.S. search engines similarly mine private data and make it available to third parties.

Hawley also has been busy in congressional hearings bludgeoning social media platforms for taking the advice of government health officials and removing false Covid and anti-vax claims. He knows full well from his years as a brilliant student at Stanford and Yale and his time as a Supreme Court clerk that the First Amendment only applies to the government. But he misleads his followers into thinking that government advice to the social media companies is coercion.

Recently, Hawley and Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey launched investigations of the Washington University Transgender Center at St. Louis Children's hospital and called for it to halt its care. Chancellor Andrew Martin, after a weak initial response, refused to halt the treatment. Meanwhile the Missouri Senate has passed a bill that would put a four-year moratorium on puberty blockers, hormone therapy and surgery for those under 18.

The Student Life newspaper's straightforward coverage of the dispute ran into criticism from both some staff members and from trans activists who said the newspaper's neutrality in its reporting harmed trans students.

New York Times editors have run into

the same criticism from within and without the newsroom. Newsroom employees wrote a letter criticizing the paper's "anti-trans bias" that aligned with "far-right hate groups."

Executive Editor Joseph Kahn responded sharply. "Participation in such a campaign is against the letter and spirit of our ethics policy. We do not welcome, and will not tolerate, participation by Times journalists in protests organized by advocacy groups or attacks on colleagues on social media and other public forums."

Hawley should stay out of the business of medical professionals and leave the family decisions to parents and children in consultation with doctors. But reporters must present a straightforward story to the public in an unbiased way.

One way that news professionals respond to the news and information chaos of today's public forum is to advocate for media literacy. Illinois was one step ahead of the rest of the country in passing the first media literacy requirement for public schools.

Emily Cooper Pierce, GJR's student editor, spent a year traveling to Illinois schools to see how it is working out. She found many teachers had not even heard about the requirement, few received professional development and there was no funding to implement the new mandate.

It's safe to say that Illinois students are no more media literate today than before the law passed.

So the nation barrels towards a brave new world of information technology as the presidential election season approaches with one leading candidate building his campaign for the world's most powerful job on a mountain of false claims about winning the last election. The criminal investigations and trials he faces are just fake news conspiracies brought on by a weaponized legal system, he claims.

How will the new wizards of AI create an algorithm that deals with the fact-free delusions of almost half the people in the country?

All this plays out in a chaotic electronic world of trillions of bits of information and misinformation - a world in which Truth tries to catch up with Falsity but lags a lap behind because false news is more sensational, simplistic and exciting.

Oh, for the time when John Milton could confidently predict on behalf of free speech that when Truth and Falsehood grapple, "who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?"

AI in journalism is here. Now what?

Educators debate how to ask and verify the answer.

By Jackie Spinner

At the start of the spring semester, the Journalism Department at San Francisco State University added a line to its student code prohibiting students from using “automated tools or assisted processes, such as machine learning or artificial intelligence” without citing the source.

Any assignments found to have represented the work of others in this way would automatically receive an F and potentially a failing grade for the course. The Office of Student Conduct also would be notified.

Rachele Kanigel, a journalism professor at San Francisco State, said she and her colleagues were concerned about students using generative AI to report and write stories. They made the change after a faculty meeting in January. “I do think generative AI has a place and could even be a useful learning tool for students, but I fear students will misuse it,” said Kanigel, who is also the faculty advisor to the student newspaper, the Golden Gate Xpress.

Like their other peers in higher ed, journalism and digital media educators are wrestling with how to address generative AI in their classrooms and student newsrooms since the introduction of user-friendly ChatGPT last November. Some want to limit its use or restrict it entirely. Others have embraced it.

“I may be the enemy among peers, but I’m actively teaching my students how to use AI this semester instead of warning against it,” said Jennifer Sadler, who teaches marketing and branding at Columbia College Chicago. “We need to be agile, creative and teach students foundational concepts alongside tools they need for a rapidly changing society.”

ChatGPT and other natural language processing models like it write responses to prompts based on sources like Wikipedia. For ChatGPT, these sources only go up to September 2021. (When prompted, for example, it admitted that it had no knowledge that former President Donald Trump had been indicted last month.) ChatGPT writes comparatively well but struggles with citations and will sometimes just make things up. It’s a toss-up in journalism which is a deadlier sin, plagiarism or fabrication. Even ChatGPT couldn’t say when I asked it.

“As an AI language model, I do not have personal beliefs or opinions. However, both plagiarism and fabrication are serious offenses in journalism and can have severe consequences for the journalist and the

publication.” Plagiarism, ChatGPT told me, can lead to legal action. Fabrication “can lead to the complete loss of trust from readers.”

That’s what concerns Kanigel, who has played around with ChatGPT and Bard, a similar generative tool from Google.

“I have to admit that the writing is better than some of my students’ writing,” she said. “But I’ve also been struck by the hallucinations, made up facts, quotes, etc. And I worry that students will use these tools when they are short on time or feeling pressured to produce.”

AI is not new to journalism. Four years before ChatGPT came onto the AI scene, Forbes declared under a headline that “The Future of Journalism is Artificial Intelligence.” By then news outlets had already been using forms of AI for years.

- The Associated Press started using artificial intelligence in 2014 to automate stories about corporate earnings from its business news desk.
- The Los Angeles Times used a bot in 2014 to write a story about an earthquake.
- The Washington Post also has used bots to cover elections and sports, starting in 2016 with the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games. In 2018, the Post won top global BIGGIES awards for its in-house AI tools.
- Bloomberg also has embraced AI, using machine learning to more easily customize document searches on its subscription “terminal”—once a machine and now software—and to create stories based on financial reports.

In other words, way before ChatGPT made artificial intelligence understandable, even magical, to most people — type in a prompt and watch it answer — major news organizations were already using AI even if most journalism schools were not teaching about it.

That means many educators are now in a place of not only discovering the technology along with their students but also in having to teach authoritatively about it without coming across as naive or inept.

It’s not an easy balance as many journalism professors have learned over the past 15 years of digital transformation within the industry.

“ChatGPT’s release in November was the inflection point,” said Adam Maksi, associate professor of journalism and media at Indiana University Southeast. “It had been building up to this. But it’s not new.”

Maksi, who is also a faculty fellow for eLearning Design & Innovation for the entire IU system, said AI creates opportunities for journalism.

“I have a colleague who would say these aren’t really tools but they are digital co-collaborator,” he said. “Many of us work collaboratively with other humans. What these tools present is a non-human collaborator. That’s what’s different.”

Through that collaboration, ChatGPT and models like it force us to ask better questions, Maksi said.

Or, as Lehigh University journalism professor Jeremy Littau wrote in a December post on Substack titled, “Who’s afraid of ChatGPT,” the question itself becomes the more important part of the process.

“ChatGPT’s ability to synthesize billions of pages on the web and give us a starting-place answer is not the death of a form or an industry,” Littau wrote. “Those answers could be incorrect, or rooted in bias. They might actually be pretty decent. But either way, they should start conversations with the humans interrogating them at the point of research and prewrite, not be the definitive copy that gets turned in for a class or published somewhere. If we treat generative text that way, we might be on to something transformational in education and media. It’s a huge opportunity to spend our brainpower on pursuing novel questions of substance and importance.”

Sarah Murray, an assistant professor in the Film, Television and Media department at the University of Michigan, said she has been talking about AI a lot this semester in a seminar digital media course.

She said it is important not to frame AI as cheating. “I push students to think about the problems that film and journalistic production have always faced,” she said. “The main example of this is industry standards of truth and authenticity, which both journalism and filmmaking ascribe to.”

Filmmakers think about the uncanny, she noted, and journalists think about reporting that operates in the realm of accessible literacies of credibility and objectivity. “Both of these have always been a problem for their respective artistic realms and both are historical problems that undergird how we teach creative arts.”

This is not the first time filmmakers and film scholars have dealt with the uncanny, she noted. “So we start by asking students, how has the uncanny been tackled in the past, and how might we lean into the



Illustration by Steve Edwards

creative affordances of AI to engage a new or different meaningful and trustworthy contract with the audience?"

In her Digital Media Strategies class in Columbia College Chicago, where I also teach, Stadler has students build content themselves and also use an AI generator. She then assigns them to write about the efficiencies and challenges of both.

"Professors are worried that students will use these things to cheat – if we should even call it that," Sadler said. "I'm just not. College is not some wonderland where we should operate like the world outside of it isn't rapidly changing. And we shouldn't be scared or worried by it."

In my Opinion class this semester, we've spent a lot of time talking about AI, particularly ChatGPT. One of their first assignments was to ask the bot to write an editorial about itself. Then I had them write their own, without assistance. We noted the differences. ChatGPT admitted it doesn't do opinion well because it cannot apply human logic. It handled the facts well enough – which we made sure to verify—but it did not know how to structure an op-ed or editorial—because it had not yet been trained. After all, it only does what it has been trained to do.

As someone who works hard to accommodate neurodiverse and non-native English learners, I see how it can be useful as assistive technology for the students who might benefit from prompts to get started.

But there are others.

- Some other ways ChatGPT could be useful for news production include personalizing newsletters, content moderation and translation.
- This is according to Nick Diakopoulos, communication professor at Northwestern University, who recently launched Generative AI in the Newsroom project.
- Damian Radcliffe, a journalism professor at the University of Oregon and fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, had these AI tips for publishers, writing for What's New in Publishing in March that smaller newsrooms, in particular, may not have the funds to invest in AI or may be wary that its benefits are being overpromised.
- Ethan Mollick, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, pointed out in this handy AI guide on Substack, that the trick is figuring out what you want AI to do for you. It's also important to know that AI lies, which is where it may be most problematic for journalists who don't fact-check what it spits out.
- "Every fact or piece of information it tells you may be incorrect," Mollick wrote. "You will need to check it all. Particularly dangerous is asking it for math, references, quotes, citations, and information for the internet."
- He followed with a guide to avoiding hallucinations, the term for falsehoods

the bots put out. This happens when AI doesn't understand the question or misinterprets the data. If the bots don't have an answer, they just fabricate one.

Maksi looks at AI differently than most journalism educators – perhaps because he understands the technology so well, including this potential for error.

For him, he goes back to understanding the purpose of journalism. "It's to bring people the need to be free and self governing or to empower people, to serve the audience, why does it matter if I use this word over this word if it's not creating a problem with meaning?" he said. "We're holding on to a traditional paradigm that may have been useful for other reasons. The most important part of journalism is reporting so if we can give people more time to report and develop those relationships, why wouldn't we?"

Maksi said he worries about educators who are too focused on teaching journalism students formulaic ways of writing because eventually those skills will be done by a computer.

"The value of a copy editor wasn't just straight up line editing but editing for bias so how do we emphasise the human elements of the skills we are teaching?" he said. "We keep pointing to the nature of the industry. Do we want to teach skills to students that are relevant and adaptable to a variety of circumstances –or the old way of doing this? This is the problem sometimes with journalism educators."

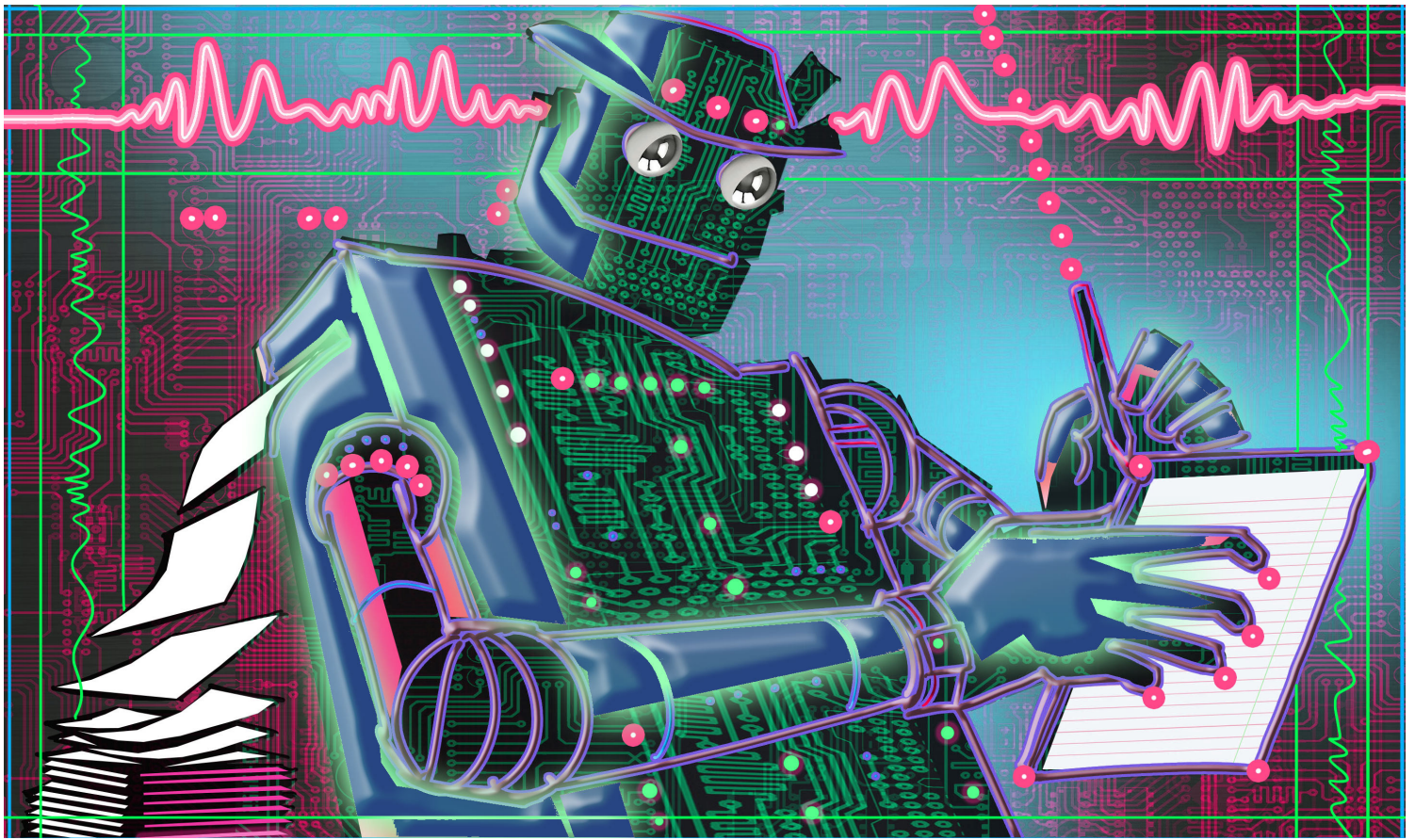


Illustration by Steve Edwards

An analysis of AI Content for journalism: Unleash it, or control it?

By Mark Sableman

Artificial intelligence ought to help journalists and other content creators. It's modern and efficient. Feed it data, tell it the subjects you want covered and watch as the finished articles pop up on your screen. Make a few tweaks and send them out. Sit back and watch the profits come in.

What could go wrong?

Everything—at least when you're expecting AI to create reader-ready content.

AI today, and in the foreseeable future, works best as a tool for creating simple stories and drafts. It's a bit like a student research assistant but one that doesn't get hungover, doesn't need coffee and doesn't complain about minimum wage. AI-drafted content will need to be scrutinized and fixed up, just like that of the student researcher. When used in this intermediary/research manner, AI will probably live up to expectations, providing useful and efficient preliminary research and first drafts.

But sending AI-created content directly out to news consumers? Don't even think about it, given the many deficiencies and biases inherent in AI-created content.

Some of the problems with AI-created content have been recognized. In a widely

reported 2022 paper, several researchers, including one previously at Google, warned of "the risk of substantial harms, including stereotyping, denigration, increases in extremist ideology, and wrongful arrest" associated with AI content creation. So the special case of journalistic use of AI-developed content deserves careful study.

AI-created content comes from a limited fixed universe—existing digital content. That's quite different from content created by a human reporter. (Let's call her Lois Lane of the Metropolis Daily Planet.)

When Lois Lane goes out on a story, she drives the streets, walks the neighborhoods, knocks on doors and talks to people who've witnessed an event. She checks with officials and civic leaders and inspects the place where the events occurred. Through this customized fieldwork, Lane finds new information.

AI programs, by contrast, draw solely from digital text, both when they are taught, and when they create content. Like the dots and lines in two-dimensional Flatland, the AI program can't imagine our 3-D world. AI works solely with information in digital databases.

The digital text that's used to train AI programs is limited and biased (even if it is accurate.) Most of the content was created in the last few decades, disproportionately by English-speaking people of wealth and power. Much was created for advocacy or polemical purposes. There's lots of sloppy social media and Internet content; by contrast, because of copyright, permission, and availability issues, they will likely be very light on the content of current published books carefully written by experts. This narrowness creates the database bias of AI content. (Database bias isn't new; libraries and publishers frequently overemphasize certain subjects, like war. AI is like a reader who digests all of the books in the library and comes out knowing far more about war-making than peacemaking.)

Human mistakes can enter when machines are taught to use the databases. Computer algorithms are simply sets of instructions for solving a problem, or set of problems, or meeting an objective. Human algorithm writers necessarily contribute some programmer bias.

There's more. AI excludes live witnesses and real-world settings, and basic

background understandings of human nature and human communities. Lois Lane does fieldwork; AI never does. AI programs miss context and real-world understandings (things that even that sleepy student research assistant might include). These omissions make up the incomplete picture bias of AI-created content.

Then there is simple accuracy. AI tools make mistakes. Consider the AI translation program that inaccurately translated a Palestinian's "good morning" into "hurt them" in Hebrew. Or the early days of Google News, when it at times featured Onion parodies as top breaking news stories. This is erroneous content creation. The effect of such errors depends somewhat on the audience. Will readers look skeptically at AI-created content, and apply good media literacy analytical skills? Or might readers trust AI, thinking it will eliminate human judgments and biases?

Next we have to consider that today's digital data contains lots of disinformation. Disinformation purveyors disguise their identities, hide their tracks, and employ psychologically sophisticated persuasion techniques, so their materials permeate the Internet, and can't be easily detected. Even readers skilled in media literacy often struggle to separate out reliable from unreliable information online. AI programs, which have no moral compass of their own, will be fed lots of disinformation, which will work its way into the AI process. This is disinformation bias.

Moreover, AI systems may well perpetuate and promote disinformation. That's certainly occurred with content-selection algorithms used by Facebook and YouTube. Algorithms can't make moral judgments. Current social media algorithms rely a lot on user choices and preferences, meaning that they often promote high-emotion content, the stuff that gets lots of hits and reposts. Some high emotion content is innocuous, like cat videos, but much more of it is hate and invective. This interplays with disinformation; impulsive social media users often embrace and repost disinformation and hate. AI content-creation programs may well mistake disinformation content's many hits and reposts as markers of credibility, and therefore use it in its own content. This would be disinformation perpetuation. One scholar who writes about "algorithmic amplification" notes, "The feedback loop is amplified by algorithms in the digital environment, which promote attitude-consistent information selection and limit cross-cutting news options," all of which "may amplify existing fears, distrust, and confirmation bias."

Let's move from information gathering to writing. How will Lois Lane's and AI's stories differ?

When she sits down at her keyboard—assuming she's not distracted or daydreaming—Lane thinks about the places

she's seen, the people she's interviewed, their points-of-view and prejudices, similar past events, her own knowledge of human nature, and even community norms, myths, hopes and fears. With this background, and considering journalistic conventions and the desire for objectivity, she carefully writes what she believes will be a fair, reliable and complete account. (Of course, if there's a soccer game that night, she may rush and cut some corners.)

Her counterpart at the Daily Planet's competitor will similarly present his or her own picture of the event, enriched by his or her own field reporting, and reflecting his or her own background, judgments, and distractions. In the old days of news competition, readers could get a pretty full picture from reading competitive multiple accounts. So human reporting benefits from both customized fieldwork and diverse human judgments.

The AI program, by contrast, will never be distracted or hurried. It will follow its programmed design, and most likely write an organizationally and grammatically respectable report. It will begin with a clear topic sentence, report supporting data, and finish with a generally reasonable conclusion. It'll look good, maybe even better than Lane's human-written counterpart. But it will reflect the biases of the database, the lack of any field investigation, the lack of community understanding, and the ugly blots of relied-on disinformation. And while different AI programs will generate different stories, they'll all carry similar machine deficiencies. That is, AI-generated content will inevitably involve drawing from limited and biased data without human judgment.

Now let's move to the actual publication.

When Lane's story comes out in the Daily Planet, it bears her byline: a direct attribution. Readers will know who wrote it and who to complain to. How will the AI story be credited? With no byline, but presented as news of comparable reliability and worthiness? Bearing the byline of a real or imaginary reporter? Hopefully, it will come with full explanation of its AI-based creation; without that, the publisher will risk engaging in misleading attribution, itself a deceptive technique, as it would give the AI-written story undeserved credibility.

Thus, from the viewpoint of just one story, AI content creation raises serious concerns about information bias, completeness, reliability, and transparency.

Even more troubling concerns arise when we look beyond individual stories to the broader effects of a news publishing system that substantially relies on unvetted AI-created content.

Digital content isn't itself the defining element of modern communications; what's most special is the immediacy of publication and response, and the breadth of those

who participate in both publishing and responding. If digital content only came from established publishers, was only published on fixed cycles, and contained no mechanism for immediate response, we'd essentially be back in the traditional media world. So we must ask: what will happen to AI content when it is sent out immediately and can be reposted and responded to immediately?

Social media has shown us that online posts go through cycles of immediate publication, redistribution, and responses. AI news content, even when erroneous or biased, is likely to be immediately read, responded to, and redistributed. Most ordinary readers don't carefully vet the content they see; if it comes from trusted sources or otherwise appeals, they accept it, apply their personal or tribal interpretations, and then use it in their own communications. That is, even clearly mistaken AI content is likely to be immediately reposted and further disseminated by those who find it comfortable and useful.

Suppose another pandemic breaks out. An editor tells an AI tool to write about whether vaccines work. Given the earnestness of the anti-covid vaccine crowd, and the financial strength of the far-right, there's a lot of anti-vaccine material on the Internet, and therefore in the databases used by AI. So early in the new pandemic, AI "news" reports, drawing from databases with lots of anti-vaccine content, and unrestricted by editorial judgment, will certainly describe anti-vaccine arguments, and probably sow doubts about vaccines. Anti-vaccine people, with strong feelings on this subject, will actively repost these accounts, which will lead to further dissemination. This is the spiral of misinformation concern.

Finally, the automation of news creation and dissemination can exacerbate the neglect of responsibilities over published materials. Although editors make their news selections for a particular time and place of publication, most often today that content immediately becomes available worldwide, essentially forever. Even false, misleading, outdated, and incomplete content stays online, and becomes searchable and useable worldwide. Automated AI-generated content could bring more worldwide no-end-set distribution of content, including misleading content. Just as the printed word carries more harm than the spoken word, because of its permanence, the never-ending worldwide distribution of false or misleading information can clearly cause great harm.

Who will review, correct, or takedown, as appropriate, AI-created automatically distributed content? Even today many human editors and publishers disclaim responsibility for the content they have released forever worldwide; will machines accept any greater responsibility? This concern is one of failure

Continued on next page

to responsibly manage online content.

All the concerns outlined here, of course, relate to direct journalistic dissemination of AI-created content. This is quite different from merely using AI-created content as a research tool or a first draft. Machine content analysis can be particularly useful, reviewing and analyzing large datasets, making them into human-understandable summaries. But those who make research and first-draft use of AI content will need to understand the many biases and deficiencies of such content. Editorial supervision is never easy. The quantity and flaws of AI-created content

will increase the demands of editors and other journalists—to carefully review, correct, improve, and supplement AI-created content before it is published.

Finally, we can't neglect the concern that in our technologically obsessed profit-driven society, number-crunching media owners will want to send AI-generated news reports directly to news consumers, despite the serious risks of bias, inaccuracy, and perpetuation of disinformation. If that occurs, professional journalists will need to stand up and insist on a careful traditional intervening editorial process—yes, a human-judgment

intense, non-technological and sometimes inefficient process—to ensure that their published news reports give readers, listeners, and viewers a fair, accurate and complete picture of the world.

Like other human-machine confrontations since the dawn of the industrial age, AI-created content may present a stark question: Will we maintain traditional standards (in this case, professional journalism), or slack off on them in the name of efficiency and industrial progress?

'ChatGPT might be our staff's best writer'

By Nick Kratsas

Podcasting. Snapchat. Video. Virtual Reality. Podcasting, again. Clubhouse.

As a digital director for media companies and now the digital advisor for West Virginia University's Student Media department, I can't tell you how many times I've had well-meaning publishers, editors, and now college students come to me excited about the hot new thing everyone is using. I have to be the sane one in the room to look at the product and decide if we should use it or give my coworkers a swat on the hand and say "no!"

So, when I started seeing chatter about the implications of how ChatGPT could affect journalism, I figured I better crack open the artificial intelligence chatbot to see what all the hubbub was about.

Artificial intelligence isn't new to the media industry; newsrooms have been using it for years to automate things like obituaries, sports agates and event listings. Some crafty people have used it to write articles for fake news sites or rewrite legitimate news articles for click baiting.

What makes the implications of ChatGPT different is it's easy to use, accessible to everyone and for the time being, free. By giving it a prompt, ChatGPT can answer questions, give advice and even write stories. The first night I used it, I stayed up until 2 a.m. letting ChatGPT write a book for me, where I gave ChatGPT the title of a chapter for each prompt and it wrote a corresponding chapter. It was a well-fleshed out story with good character development, an interesting plot and a story that weaved in information from previous answers.

The next day, through blurry eyes from lack of sleep, I began to test different prompts for actual journalism uses. The results were a mixed bag that were both great and scary. Some of the results included:

- I asked it to give me five ideas for news articles for National Donut Day. It gave

me five great ideas that I would have actually used.

- I gave it the web address of a recent press release from our university and asked it to write a news article about the information on the page. It created a fairly well written article in AP style that did a good job of explaining the information accurately.
- I made up some names and stats for a basketball game and asked for it to write a sports article. It gave me a well written recap and even added some color and conjecture based on my prompt, even giving the coach a few quotes.
- I gave it a prompt that our university president announced that enrollment was down 20% and that this would result in a 15% cut in employees. ChatGPT created an article talking about how the university would pull through this time and focus on student enrichment, and even made up quotes from the president.
- I gave it a prompt asking it to write an opinionated editorial from my editorial board saying our editorial board was against a newly passed campus carry bill, that students were not happy about this new law and that the legislature should repeal the law. It wrote the best editorial my staff has put together since I've worked at the paper and filled in all kinds of background on campus carry and even scolded the university for not doing enough to protect students.

My conclusion was that ChatGPT might be our staff's best writer. I could see this could be a great tool for generating ideas and doing research, but I was also worried about a student turning in an article that ChatGPT wrote.

With no policies in place for such a scenario, I decided to bring my concerns to my student media director. We both agreed that it was unlikely one of our students would

turn in an AI written article, but we should probably have something in our handbook just in case.

The next day, "just in case" happened when an email popped up on the College Media Association listserv about how an adviser at another university had a student confess that their last column was written by ChatGPT. Who would have guessed Skynet's first move against humanity would be to help a student meet deadline?

There's a lot of implications with using ChatGPT for journalism. Is it plagiarism to feed ChatGPT your reporting notes and let it write an article? How do you even determine an article was written by AI software; there's no public record of what ChatGPT generated? I also worry about the amount of conjecture and the creation of quotes and opinions ChatGPT generated in my prompts—a lazy staff could let in false information or subjective analysis of information, or worse, promote ChatGPT's use with their staff. We need to address this in our handbooks, even if it's just to establish that it exists and that we'll be developing new policies as we understand ChatGPT's uses.

So, what does ChatGPT think of using it to write articles?

"As an AI language model, ChatGPT can be used to generate news articles. However, it is important to note that ChatGPT is not a journalist and does not have the ability to fact-check or verify information in the same way that human journalists do.

Moreover, the ethics of using AI for journalism are still a topic of debate, as there are concerns about the potential for bias and lack of transparency in AI-generated content. Therefore, any news articles generated by ChatGPT should be carefully reviewed and edited by human journalists to ensure accuracy, fairness, and journalistic integrity."

I couldn't have written that better myself.

Reinventing learning in response to AI

By Shashidhar Nanjundaiah

ChatGPT (Generative Pre-Trained Transfer) is an exciting new arrival that was launched on November 30, 2022. It is a product of the technological geniuses that have been working on artificial intelligence. ChatGPT can formulate legal notes, spot humanly undetectable diseases, and write computer code.

In his interview with the news network ABC on March 16, Sam Altman, the CEO behind Open AI, the company that created ChatGPT, has declared that this could be the “greatest technology humanity has yet developed.” Yet it is now a headache for educators because it can easily act as a substitute for student effort. As Altman said in that interview, education may need to change. However, I am not writing this as a technological determinist.

How should we respond when technology substitutes for established human processes? Higher education administrators have acted with stunning alacrity to control this new onslaught. Committees and workshops are being formed to help understand the scope and to brainstorm ways forward; teachers are designing ways to tackle it in the classroom. Still, educators are *unsure* whether this new technology should be allowed into classrooms partly because we simply cannot predict the outcomes of doing so.

On one extreme, there is downright skepticism. The excessive perception of threat, as though we are encountering an insurmountable burden, comes with a sense of vindication of a long-standing view that mobile technology should not be allowed in classrooms. Invisibilizing something that has become a constant companion is at best a technical resolution. ChatGPT has caused further discomfort among these skeptics because it poses a deeper threat to the long form of learning that pedagogy has always offered. ChatGPT enables a student to take short-cuts, it destabilizes our models of authentic learning.

A second kind of reception to this new technology, the uncritical response, stems from the assumption of inevitability. Among these educators there is somewhat incomprehensible jubilation. To them, early adoption of technology should be considered an edge in the competitive marketplace. Administrators and owners may hold this stand; however, that pressure is passed on to teacher-learning and into classroom adoption. In this uncritical adoption there is a sense that education

must adapt to technology.

Either way, some educators are bending over backwards to accommodate ChatGPT as a supporter of classroom learning, and this is a pragmatic approach. Some professors in the United States claim to dodge the problem simply by giving assignments that ChatGPT cannot answer. In this method, the educator's challenge is that they must first master ChatGPT in order to beat it.

Even within this immediate approach, a three-step method helps: One is to train students how to use ChatGPT responsibly, tell them it is not foolproof, that an algorithm cannot substitute for the human brain's ability to go deep into subjects.

The second step is to assign the student to declare what questions they asked ChatGPT and have a backup assignment for each take-home assignment. For example, a student comes to class and makes a presentation about that assignment, explaining and answering the teacher's questions.

The third is to revisit our assessment system. Having offered the student the option to use ChatGPT, the teacher then randomly cross-checks by visiting the platform and asking the same questions of it. They can then create a rubric in which a ChatGPT assignment will be evaluated differently from a manually done assignment.

These are ad hoc and hurried responses. This is understandable: As educators, our first commitment is to the classroom. The other way to defend our immediate responses is that they add up to larger solutions, organically and gradually.

While attempting to re-stabilize our learning systems, the steps in learning should be subservient to the actual outcomes. ChatGPT enables easy access to available information; it disables established processes of actual learning. If we look underneath technological solutions, the concern should be how to keep learning afloat. Hence the question before us should be: How can we create a fluid form of knowledge that must necessarily lead to independent knowledge-seeking?

The problem of pedagogy is that it relies too much on historical knowledge and not enough on intellectual progress of societies. Our modern education systems evolved not despite but from the enablements of science, which, in turn, emerged from the same education systems. From the printing press to search engines, technology has both determined

and been determined by our societies.

Therefore, it should be unfathomable that we should suddenly feel disempowered at the hands of technology.

Artificial intelligence runs the risk of being hijacked. Our truths are destabilized by the surfacing of the much-maligned ‘alternative truths’, and AI-enabled products can nonchalantly amplify fake news and conspiracy theories. But more importantly, this ‘new truths environment’ has given rise to uncertainty—what should we believe anymore? Altman rightly points out that he fears which humans would be in control. We have been trying to reinstate modern institutions in their central position of authority, but social trust in these institutions is eroding.

In a world where certainty reassures us, we are repeatedly struck by uncertainty. The need for certainty, for control, is intrinsic to us. A sense of helplessness and uncertainty pervades our current environment, and the angst is palpable. German systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, writing in the 1980s, argued that uncertainty generates angst among societies. Uncertainty can be troubling, but it can evolve independent thought. It can become the very methodology of constancy of knowledge-seeking using the uncertainty of inquiry.

For example, can education be the platform to inform our students that the world we now occupy is divided, so that each piece of information becomes a tool for building new knowledge? Can our assignments demand of students what we never demanded before—that each response be a new piece in that progression?

More than 30 years ago, it became clear that robots would replace many humans, mainly threatening manufacturing jobs. Workers needed to pivot and re-tool their skills failing which they would be left irrelevant. Something similar is happening now. Educators need to re-skill themselves, but that will never be enough. They also need to reinvent the knowledge-creating mechanism. How we should go about it should be the question that is located at the center of our educational response to AI. T

An earlier version of this article was first published in The Asian Age, New Delhi, India, on March 24.

By ChatGPT

Prompt:

Write a 500 word profile written in the style of William H. Freivogel on Sam Altman. Focus on his time in St. Louis.

Answer:

Sam Altman is a name that resonates with the startup community worldwide. Altman has an impressive track record in the technology industry, from being the CEO of Loopt, a location-based social networking app, to becoming the president of startup accelerator Y Combinator. But few people know about Altman's early years and his formative experiences in the Midwest.

Sam Altman was born on April 22, 1985, in Chicago, Illinois. He grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where he attended John Burroughs School, a prestigious private school. Even as a teenager, Altman was an entrepreneur. He started his first business at the age of 13, selling computers to his classmates. Altman's love for technology led him to pursue computer science at Stanford University, where he graduated with a degree in 2007.

After graduating from Stanford, Altman co-founded Loopt with two other Stanford graduates, Nick Sivo and Alok Deshpande. Loopt was a location-based social networking app that allowed users to connect with friends and discover new places around them. The app was a hit, and it attracted millions of users. Loopt was acquired by Green Dot Corporation in 2012, and Altman became Green Dot's executive vice president of mobile.

Altman's success at Loopt caught the attention of Y Combinator, a startup accelerator that provides seed funding and mentorship to early-stage startups. In 2014, Altman was named the president of Y Combinator, succeeding co-founder Paul Graham. Altman's leadership transformed Y Combinator into one of the most respected and influential startup accelerators in the world. During his tenure, Y Combinator invested in over 1,000 startups, including Airbnb, Dropbox, and Reddit.

While Altman's career has taken him to Silicon Valley, he has never forgotten his roots in St. Louis. Altman has always been proud of his Midwestern heritage, and he has spoken frequently about the importance of building vibrant startup communities outside of the coasts. Altman has also been a generous donor to St. Louis causes. In 2016, Altman and his wife, Elizabeth, donated \$1 million to LaunchCode, a St. Louis-based nonprofit that provides free coding education and job placement services.

Altman's commitment to St. Louis is rooted in his own experiences growing up in the city. Altman has spoken about the challenges of building a tech career in the Midwest, where venture capital funding is scarce and the startup ecosystem is less developed than in Silicon Valley. Altman has credited his success to the support he received from the St. Louis community, including his family, friends, and mentors.

Altman's impact on St. Louis extends beyond his charitable giving. Altman has also been a vocal advocate for the city's tech scene, and he has encouraged other entrepreneurs to consider building their companies in St. Louis. In 2015, Altman hosted a Y Combinator event in St. Louis, where he met with local entrepreneurs and investors. The event was a success, and it helped to raise the profile of the St. Louis tech community.

Altman's legacy in St. Louis is still being written. While he has moved on to other ventures, Altman's commitment to the city that shaped him remains strong. Altman's story is a testament to the power of entrepreneurship and the importance of giving back to one's community. His success serves as an inspiration to other young entrepreneurs who are looking to build their own startups outside of the traditional tech hubs.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This story was fact-checked.*

There were some factual contradictions between the ChatGPT story and other reported stories about Altman. For example, ChatGPT says that he and his wife made a joint donation to LaunchCode. But other reporting says that Altman didn't have a wife because he was gay and came out during his senior year of high school. Furthermore, Altman co-founded Loopt with two other Stanford graduates but also with his childhood friends, Rick and Tom Pernikoff. Finally, ChatGPT says he graduated from Stanford while the New York Times says he dropped out as a sophomore.



Illustration by Steve Edwards

News Analysis: St. Louis tech startup that funded far-right fantasies still at it in spite of scrutiny

By Paul Wagman

Nearly a year has passed since the Gateway Journalism Review first reported that LockerDome, a prominent St. Louis tech startup, had become a company that partners with some of the most notorious right-wing websites in the country.

Serving as an advertising middleman, LockerDome was actually helping to fuel dozens of sites promoting election denial, white supremacy, Christian nationalism, Covid skepticism, climate-change denial and other far-right passions and fantasies, GJR subsequently uncovered.

St. Louis's own Gateway Pundit and Rumble, a video platform that hosts Steve Bannon's War Room podcast, were two of the most prominent sites among perhaps more than 100 that had been or currently were the St. Louis company's business partners..

LockerDome, which in February of 2022 changed its name to Decide Technologies, has its headquarters at 1314 Washington Ave. There, in the heart of downtown St. Louis, the company was quietly monetizing a substantial swath of the misinformation ecosphere that many observers see as not

only spreading hate but as imperiling the foundations of American democracy.

A few spasms of outrage ensued. They appear, however, not to have had the slightest effect on Decide's operations

- On Feb. 11, 2023, BigLeaguePolitics.com ran a story, bedecked with ads from Decide, that gloated over a reported loss of revenue by Adidas stemming from its cancellation of its relationship with Kanye West. The cancellation followed expressions of blatant anti-Semitism by the celebrity, now known as Ye. Over the subhead "Get Woke, Go Broke," the story invoked well-known anti-Semitic tropes of its own:

"Because Ye stated his controversial thoughts about Jewish power, he is being systematically destroyed by an open conspiracy of the world's most powerful interests. Ari Emanuel, CEO of Endeavor and brother of former Chicago Mayor and Obama crony Rahm Emanuel, gave the orders for the corporate elite to sever ties with Ye in an op-ed last week."

- On Feb. 15, WND.com carried a report

that the U.S. Supreme Court "is going to look" again at the 2020 election because of claims of fraud. The story concluded with an editor's note lamenting that the United States, "Long the world's most Christian nation, ... is being taken over by a new 'official' national religion ... Wokeism." Legal experts point out that the claim is legally baseless and already has been rejected once by the Supreme Court. The story was preceded and interspersed with four ads served by Decide.

- On Feb. 17, ResisttheMainstream warned "COVID Vaccine Brings Higher Heart Risk, Little Benefit to Young Men," amidst ads from Decide. Resist the Mainstream was founded by a native of Macedonia, Rumen Naumovski, who donated the maximum allowed under the law to the 2022 Congressional campaign of Ron Watkins, a major proponent of QAnon theories. Some journalists have suggested he, or his father, or both, actually are Q. Watkins lost his congressional race in Arizona.

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Gabe Lozano, co-founder and CEO of Decide, at the company's downtown headquarters before it changed its name.

Photo courtesy of Entrepreneur Quarterly

- On Feb. 21, 2023, The Federalist reported, "The 'Twitter Files' Reveal Big Tech's Unholy Alliance With The Feds Exists To Control You." On the same day, it reported that an "occasionally incoherent" Biden had promised to "indefinitely squander U.S. taxpayer dollars on a proxy war" in Ukraine "while his own country crumbles." Both stories were splattered with ads served by Decide.
- And finally, in a prospectus filed Nov. 14, 2022 with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Rumble Inc. reported: "A material portion of Rumble's revenue is generated from a small number of key advertising networks. For the three and nine months ended September 30, 2022, approximately 19% and 33%, respectively, of Rumble's total revenue derived from two advertising networks, Google AdSense and Decide (formerly known as LockerDome)."

Rumble hosts not only Bannon but also Alex Jones ("InfoWars") and Nicholas J. Fuentes, the anti-Semite who famously joined West for dinner with Trump at Mar-a-Lago. A recent Fuentes program on Rumble carried the title, "We Gotta Stop Dissing Nazis All the Time!"

Stonewalling works

When GJR reported on Decide's activities in 2022, the company did not respond to repeated requests for comment. It was following the advice of legal counsel, according to a former employee who asked not to be named because he still has friends at the company. Decide has also refused to comment to any of the other media outlets that have reported on its operations and refused again to answer questions from the GJR for this story.

The company's lawyers and executives may have calculated, as companies and individuals often do, that their best strategy was to keep mum and hope the story would blow over. If so, it appears to have been a smart calculation, because the only visible reactions to the revelations about the company came from sources far removed from the centers of power in St. Louis.

Several St. Louisans and a few people who follow the digital ad industry nationally expressed shock on Twitter. The St. Louis American newspaper, which focuses on the African-American community, carried a harsh denunciation of the company in its Political Eye column. St. Louis Public Radio also provided coverage, and EQ, a website that covers the startup community in St. Louis, followed up with two in-depth pieces that focused on the economics of the partnerships.

And finally, Bloomberg gave the story

national exposure, noting, "Whereas many advertising networks refuse to work with sites accused of fomenting conspiracy theories and other misinformation, Decide appears to welcome them." The Bloomberg story, however, was posted on the afternoon before Thanksgiving and was aimed primarily at a business audience.

To date, neither the St. Louis Post-Dispatch nor the St. Louis Business Journal has picked up the story. Nor, for months, had there been any visible response from the office of St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones, even though St. Louis is impacted by the gun culture that Decide monetizes through its support of websites like GunpowderMagazine.com, and even though The Gateway Pundit has personally targeted the Mayor in his coverage -- and at one point sued her. As this magazine went to press, however, a spokesman for the Mayor provided this comment by email: "Mayor Jones condemns hatred, bigotry, and misinformation in all forms."

If any part of the business community has come down on the company or its leaders, they did so in private, and, as noted, with no apparent impact.

In short, the story about Decide simply hasn't broken through. And as a result, none of the company's top executives -- Gabe Lozano, chief executive; Mark Lewis, chief financial officer; Ryan Allen, president; or Carol Matthews, who until her recent retirement was the company's longtime senior vice president operations -- has faced scrutiny in a forum that might matter to them. The same goes for two prominent Decide board members and investors, Brian Matthews and Cliff Holekamp, who, in fact, continue to get only respectful coverage (see, for example, this recent Business Journal story.)

Holekamp, until recently the head of the entrepreneurship program at Washington University's Olin School of Business, is one reason for the company's close, multi-faceted relationship with Washington University, from which about one-fifth of LockerDome's employees had degrees as of last year.

"They know everybody"

LockerDome/Decide is in some respects the "baby" of a powerful and well-connected St. Louis venture capital company, Cultivation Capital. Cultivation has made repeated investments in the company since it took its initial stake in 2012 and holds that stake in its very first investment fund, called Tech Fund I.

Cultivation Capital is Tech Fund 1's general partner and, sources say, rounded up a large number of wealthy St. Louisans to be the limited partners. Public disclosure of the names of limited partners is not required, so there is no readily available

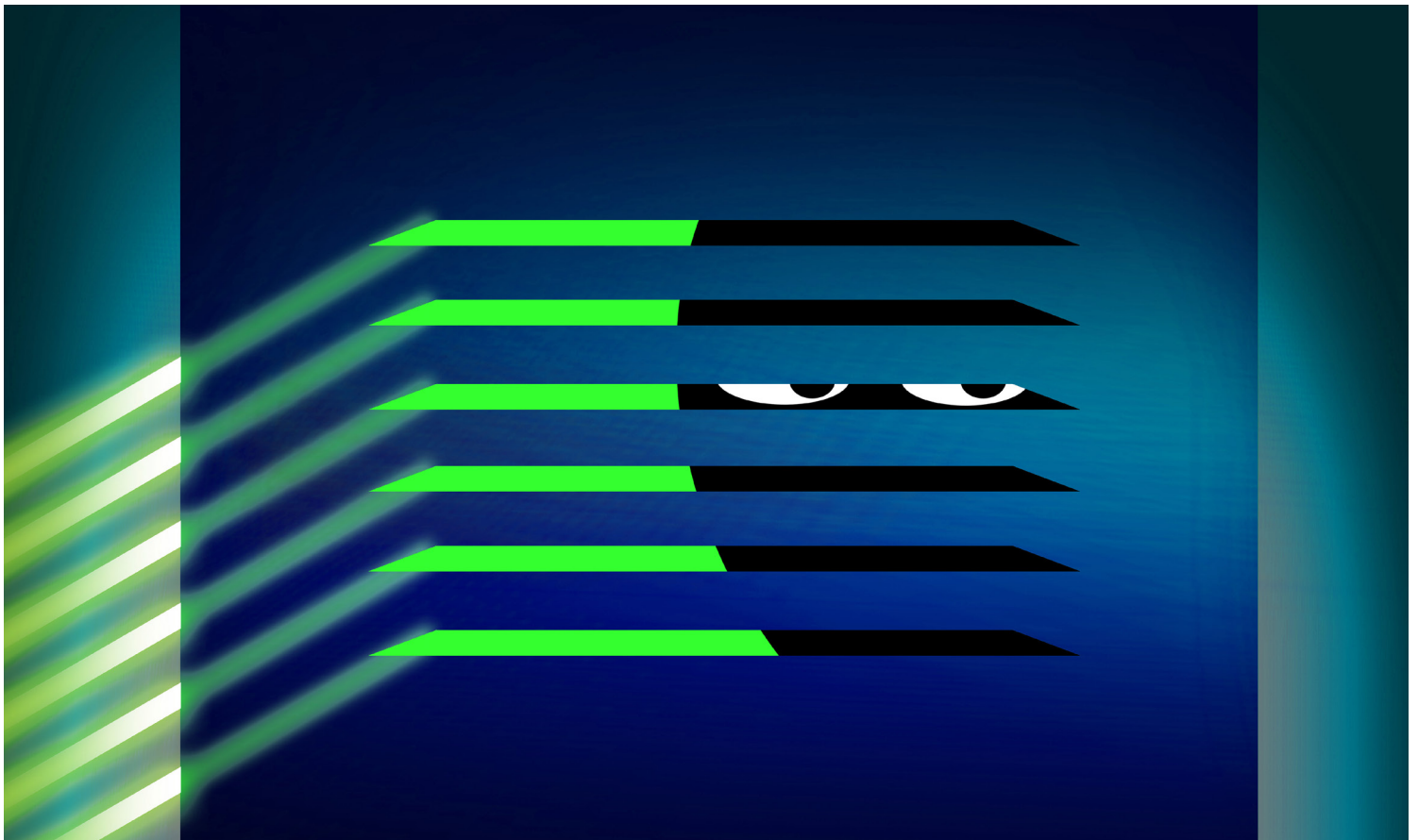


Illustration by Steve Edwards

list of them, but a person who turned down the opportunity to be one said many were friends and business associates of Holekamp. He is a co-founder of Cultivation Capital who now heads up the company's office in Greenville, South Carolina.

The connection between Cultivation Capital and Decide is said to be all the stronger because of what multiple sources described as a close friendship between another Cultivation Capital co-founder, Brian Matthews, and Robert Lozano, the father of Decide's chief executive. Matthews is also a Decide investor from his own account. Additionally, he has been on the board of LockerDome since 2012 and has been connected to the company through his wife, Carol, who is not only the former head of operations but also, like him, an investor in the company.

Gabe Lozano now lives in Austin, Texas, where he moved after the death of his wife and where he has opened a satellite office of Decide. Lozano is, therefore, a much less visible presence in St. Louis now than he was just a few years ago, when he was a poster boy for tech startups here. Nevertheless, he is still CEO, and no one seems to doubt that he led the company's adoption of its current strategy.

Brian Matthews and, to a lesser extent his wife Carol, have also been key players, a source with knowledge of the company said.

Brian Matthews is an eminence at the

very center of the startup scene in St. Louis. The company he co-founded in 2012, Cultivation Capital, has played a key role in creating something all observers agreed was desperately needed in St. Louis – a promising environment for entrepreneurs, especially tech entrepreneurs. By plugging a gap here between very early startup funding and later-stage venture capital, Cultivation Capital has fostered the growth of a long list of St. Louis companies and the jobs that go with them.

Cultivation Capital's Tech Fund 1 has now been followed by ten more funds. Crunchbase, a business information website, says the venture capital firm has now invested in 205 companies – some out of state but dozens or scores here – with more than \$228 million. Under the circumstance, some might consider Cultivation Capital's and Brian Matthews' ties to Decide as little more than a peccadillo.

Cultivation Capital is now the dominant venture capital company in St. Louis, and its power and reach in its hometown are extraordinary. Many of St. Louis's startup accelerators – Capital Innovators, SixThirty, Prosper, and Yield Lab – are in some way backed by Cultivation, either financially or through back-office support, an article in the St. Louis Business Journal noted in 2016. Here's how the article quoted Jim Eberlin, a successful entrepreneur here: "Everybody finds them and they know

everybody and everything going on here in St. Louis."

The majority of the sources contacted for this story asked not to be identified. "It's a small community and I don't want to get into trouble," said one, echoing many others.

In business to make money

What is perhaps most important in understanding the situation, however, is this: Decide exists to make money. And as long as what it is doing is legal – which it is – then most or all of those connected with it are not going to make a fuss.

Now retired, Jim Brasunas is the founding board member and former executive director of ITEN, a business incubator. Brasunas, who is widely respected, knows many of the players in the St. Louis startup community. GJR interviewed him last fall.

"In the early days of Lockerdome," he said, "Gabe Lozano connected with ITEN. We offered advice and support, which he chose not to follow. He's a very independent guy and that, of course, was his right. But as often happens with startups, their initial assumptions of how the business would grow met the realities of the marketplace.

"Investors, however, expect a return and Gabe had encouraged his investors to expect a really sizable one. Apparently it

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was those pressures that led them into the business with these right-wing websites. I know many of the company's investors. And although we've never discussed political views, I don't believe there's a rabid right-winger among them. My guess is it's more likely the opportunity to make money that's the driver here."

An interview this past December with a person who is a limited partner in Tech Fund 1 illustrated just that mentality.

The investor said that in its regular reports to investors, Cultivation Capital had never delved into operational details about LockerDome/Decide. Instead, he had learned of the company's connections with the far-right from this publication's previous coverage.

He was not pleased, he said. "I do know the harm."

But his main concern was financial. "Investors want money back," he said. "They want a return on their money. We're all looking at a pretty good profit from LockerDome at this point."

Some of those consulted by GJR even said it might be legally perilous for Decide's leaders to move the company away from its far-right partners if it meant financial harm. They have a fiduciary responsibility to the company's shareholders, they said, and Cultivation Capital has similar responsibilities to the investors in Tech Fund 1.

"Basically (it's a) mess because you've got a true fiduciary responsibility at that level," said Ben Burke, a veteran of the St. Louis entrepreneurship scene who is now executive director of a nonprofit in Arizona. "You know it's not like a little startup just figuring things out with a couple of bro's in a basement. You've got true fiduciary responsibility to investors. So even if Gabe (Lozano) was like, 'This is all BS, I can't believe we did this, I want to turn this off and focus in another direction,' ... he would have such an uphill battle to do that."

For any limited partner who wanted to cut his ties with Decide, selling his or her stake would be another mess.

"These are pretty illiquid investments," a person in the venture capital business explained. "So it's hard to exit. Can you find somebody who will buy your investment for a fraction of what you pay for it? Yeah, probably but it's a small part of the investor's portfolio, and so they'd just as soon leave well enough alone."

In any case, Decide can always argue that it is politically agnostic, because it also serves ads to some liberal web sites, such as the Euclid Media Group, which publishes The Riverfront Times, and the online version of the National Catholic Reporter. As GJR noted in its earlier reports, however, the company's own list of the "publishers" (websites) with which it does business

"If you start exploring the employees of this company and even by extension the wider space, it's almost like they're being hit men"

— former employee

shows that far-right sites greatly outweigh those that are on the liberal or left side of the spectrum. Industry analysts say the far right is where the money is for publishers, advertisers and advertising platforms like Decide and Google, because that's where the clicks are.

This argument that the company impartially serves all parts of the political spectrum is one, however, that leadership used internally, said the former employee who asked not to be named because he still has friends at the company. Many of the company's own workers seemed to have no idea how much Decide's business was concentrated on the right, he said, because the company promoted this impression of neutrality. He didn't know himself when he joined the company, he said, and he only gradually figured it out on his own.

But some employees did know, he said. And at least a few of them keep doing their jobs even though they personally appeared to oppose everything that the far-right stands for. Three current high-ranking employees, for example, demonstrate — in one case, even boast -- of liberal bona fides on their personal social accounts.

"If you start exploring the employees of this company and even by extension the wider space, it's almost like they're being hit men," the former employee said. "'Just give me the cash and I'll do whatever you ask.' And that was the biggest thing that shocked me once this came out. I know there are plenty of these employees who don't believe in it (alt-right thinking) right up to the point where they're getting paid to do it."

The tech downturn

In any event, it now appears that Decide may be in a slump. Another former employee told GJR that the downturn in

the tech industry caused the company to call off a private fundraising last winter that would have injected still more capital into its operations. Tech stocks fell more than 30 percent in 2022, a decline that also dramatically affected the valuations of privately held tech companies like LockerDome.

"I think they were all really excited about it (the fundraiser) when the market took obviously a turn for the worse," the former employee said. "They were attempting to fetch a valuation that was fairly high, that became -- I would say -- certainly unreachable in the market's current conditions. That I know for a fact."

In advance of the fundraiser, Decide had been on "basically a hiring spree," the former employee said, so that it could demonstrate rapid growth.

But the market's downturn has meant that the company has recently had to lay off as much as a fourth of its 100-person work force, he said. Decide's LinkedIn page, which listed nearly 90 employees last summer, now lists 78. The page says 28 of those employees are based in the St. Louis area; last summer it said there were 44.

The downturn also means that investors -- who, given the 10-year horizon for most venture capital investments, have already been rather patient -- may have to keep waiting if they are going to get a rich return.

Their hopes have been dashed before.

In 2015, the Business Journal reported, "LockerDome, the social media website that has long-been a darling of the St. Louis startup scene, is among a group of clubhouse leaders anticipated to exit in the next year or so." Rick Holton, a general partner in Cultivation Capital, was sufficiently optimistic that the story quoted him as saying, "We need LockerDome to go out for a billion dollars so people turn around and say, 'How'd I miss getting in on that?'"

The wait, apparently, will continue.

In the meantime, some in the misinformation ecosphere are beginning to face consequences. The Gateway Pundit, with which Decide did business for years and may still, stands accused of defamation in two suits — one in St. Louis Circuit Court over his accusations against two Georgia poll workers, the other in Denver over his accusations against the security chief of Dominion Voting Systems. Alex Jones has already been fined more than \$1.4 billion for his falsehoods about the Sandy Hook massacre. Fox News is being sued for \$1.6 billion in another defamation case brought by Dominion.

But the St. Louis company that has helped some of these and other websites like them spread this kind of misinformation all over the country has stirred only a few peeps of harmless protest in its own hometown.



Belleville West High School in Belleville, Illinois.

Photo by Emily Cooper-Pierce

Illinois' first in the nation media literacy law falls short

By Emily Cooper Pierce

A windy 27 degrees covered Bedford Park, IL as airplanes from nearby Chicago Midway Airport flew above John Hancock College Prep High School. The bell rang to start the day.

In the year following a new Illinois law that requires instruction of media literacy at the public high school level, the state's educators have been learning and relearning how to implement this new requirement into classrooms like this one with little oversight or guidance from the state as to how to proceed.

Raymond Salazar, an English teacher at the Bedford Park high school, hit pause on his calming music from behind his desk in the front of the room. Students of his AP English class slowly quieted as Salazar walked to the center of the whiteboard to explain the class' assignment for the day.

There were three options written colorfully on the board. One, students will complete their box project. Two, students

will finish their audio essay: "yes, this counts as an assignment," read the board. Or three, read the school's newspaper and write a response to something.

The sounds of keys pressing on student's Chromebooks filled the classroom.

Students sat in pods softly talking about their class project, an audio story. The story, Salazar explained, was a personal narrative detailing space and a life lesson where students learned how to tell a story with a digital twist.

Of all the students, a handful were chosen to share their work within the school. Those picked crafted a black box in which they created a QR code to showcase their audio story in an audience-friendly manner.

Across the classroom, students working on the box project worked together to complete their projects.

In one pod, specifically, students collaborated to help each other center their text on Word and download their QR codes.

Those picked crafted a black box in which they created a QR code to showcase their audio story in an audience-friendly manner.

Salazar answered students' pressing questions like how to create a QR code using qr-code-generator.com or which fonts to use in their box project.

According to the Illinois Press Foundation, JHCPHS was among 16 awarded with a grant to help fund the school's accounts on Soundtrap by Spotify for each student for a whole year. Soundtrap by Spotify is the audio recording platform Salazar uses with his students, he said.

"The biggest takeaway from the box project is that another area of growth for us is teaching students how to read fluently," Salazar said. "We talked about this a little bit, that was a big struggle, but they really enjoyed it. I think it was a nice challenge

Continued on next page



John Hancock College Prep High School in Bedford Park, Illinois.

Photo by Emily Cooper-Pierce

with a real outcome for a real audience. I'm just really happy that I was able to give them this opportunity so that they can find some confidence and competence as writers."

During Salazar's class, students engaged in the class project through constant conversation amongst each other in their desk pods. Their reactions to the media literacy material stemmed from their continual questions to Salazar as he stood behind his podium uploading student's projects to their class website.

Students, who referred to Salazar as Salazar, were responsive to his comments or suggestions.

For a majority of the class period, students quietly focused on finishing their project before the bell concluded the class session.

Merging on Interstate 57 south to Mt. Vernon, Illinois, after a few hours, stands Mt. Vernon Township High School right off the highway exit.

Before the sound of the bell, Raquel Bliffen, an English teacher at Mount Vernon, and students discussed the best types of road trip snacks as Bliffen prepared for the class.

After the students' silent 10-minute reading time, Bliffen walked to the front of the room to sit on her wooden stool. Media literacy is spelled out in the corner of the whiteboard's schedule.

Introducing the new state requirement of media literacy, Bliffen's students recalled learning about media literacy with a different teacher. Student's interest spiked up as if a light bulb was lit.

A brief classroom discussion followed.

Bliffen walked to each pod of desks and passed out a sheet of paper to her students: "what do you know?"

The front of the worksheet categorized various media-related terms and the backside determined whether a headline was legitimate, unfortunately worded but true or was clickbait.

Following a semi-silent few minutes, Bliffen requested students stand up if they fall in the worksheet's "I could teach" category to learn where each student was on each of the terms.

Confirmation bias. Fringe source. Native ad. Satire. Spin. Vetting.

Bliffen defined each term.

Turning the page over, Bliffen and her class walked through news headlines and determined which category they fit in.

"Bank runs starting in United States!!! Liquidity Crisis Erupts!" read one headline. Students shouted out "clickbait." Bliffen returned their answer with "why?"

Class discussion followed.

What do you think when you think of the internet, Bliffen asked the class.

Bliffen wrote fake news on the whiteboard. Biases, Photoshop, The Daily

Wire, bullying, reality TV, viruses, lack of proper support, legit, too much celebrity news (i.e., BuzzFeed), personal rights, Twitter, nudes (lack of responsibility) and idolization of extremists, follows suit.

After each student left a check mark on the whiteboard next to the one they believe is the worst, Bliffen determined personal rights had four check marks.

Class discussion followed, Bliffen chimed in when necessary, but let the students lead each conversation.

Bliffen said the use of media, regarding the bill's terms, is to come later in student's speech research.

Students in Bliffen's classroom filled the air with comments, questions and even suggestions throughout her interactive worksheet activity. Sitting in on the introduction class on media literacy for Bliffen's class, her students engaged in the topic from the start. Many jumped at the opportunity to provide input to the class' varying discussions.

Heading westbound on 64 from I-57 through a field of corn comes the light of a school on the horizon, Belleville West High School.

The 8 a.m. bell rang and students made their way to their seats. It was presentation day for the project they were working on in Nick Johnson's senior English class.

Student in Johnson's class used the book titled "True or False, A CIA analyst guide to spotting fake news" by Cindy Otis alongside their market research project.

"I gave them a demographics and psychographics survey for the class to take," Johnson said. "Then, when we looked at the results. We looked for trends, surprises, like any data we find significant. Then, they have to invent a product to market to this demographic, this class, based on what they learned. So, a little bit of media research and then inventing of a product, a little bit of writing going with that, and then they'll ultimately, in a group, choose one of their products to turn into an internet ad, like a video ad. So, there will be some creation in there, too."

Otis' book goes through the entire history of how fake news has been used like disinformation campaigns and not just yellow journalism around the world and in the United States, Johnson said. Then, it goes through modern day.

"That's a nice text to add that has been good for conversation and just kind of understanding and awareness," Johnson said.

After a few moments of last minute changes, and the sounds of a Kahoot game over the classroom's speakers lowered, the first group of four students in Johnson's class made their way to the front of the class.

How to spot fake news articles.

Students read through slides that showcased their understanding of Otis' text while sparking conversation with the larger group.

Students were advised by the first group to determine which headline was real or fake. One read about Beyoncé and was published on Feb. 31.

"Why did you think it was real," Johnson asked one of the presenters.

Through class discussion, the date of the article was raised and made aware to the larger group that Feb. 31 does not exist, thus it is fake.

Group two covered understanding bias, group three covered polling and other fake news, while the final group covered spotting fake photos and videos.

Throughout the presentations, students asked "why," sparking additional discussion on each topic. Johnson chimed in when necessary, but let the students lead each conversation.

In addition to the presentations, students created an advertisement using WeVideo, an online cloud-based video editing platform, in which they produced a video to promote their invented product. Johnson showed a handful.

It was cool to see classmates perk up when others presented, Johnson said. It's uncommon, so it's nice to see.

Though an 8 am class may seem quiet, Johnson's students actively participated in Johnson's media literacy material. With the push to create a presentation, whether through a slideshow or Kahoot game, students were open to classroom discussion on the varying topics that were presented. Many of the students were seen laughing and even asking their fellow classmates questions to learn more about a specific topic like polling biases.

Salazar, Bliffen and Johnson were receptive to student's opinions and comments while keeping the core of the media literacy topic at the center of the conversations, guiding the discussions while also letting students take a primary lead.

With little else to lean upon, teachers lack resources and guidance to navigate through this new requirement. This forces teachers to rely on personal experiences and in-the-moment reactions to structure their classroom.

Salazar said he is a teacher teaching through experience and learning from reactions.



Mt. Vernon Township High School in Mt. Vernon, Illinois.

Photo by Emily Cooper-Pierce

After COVID-19, media literacy was on a 'back burner'

By Emily Cooper Pierce

Teachers came out of the COVID-19 pandemic, then they heard about the Illinois' media literacy requirement.

Raquel Bliffen, an English teacher at Mt. Vernon Township High School, said her reaction to the new requirement may have been tainted by her whole mindset since COVID-19, which is "kind of like one more thing."

"I kind of felt a little burnt out at that point," Bliffen said. "I think that's every teacher's first response when they are told they have to do something else. I don't think that's necessarily in response to the bill itself because I think it is really important. Part of me wondered if it wasn't smarter to have our computer teachers teach that because media literacy, while it is really important and everybody should teach it, it just kind of felt more in line with what our computer teachers are already teaching. So, whenever I found out English had to teach it, I was sort of like 'really?' But I get it. I think I was just kind of like a kid getting used to an itchy sweater where

I just kind of had to fight against it for a second and be like 'okay, I get it, I need to do this.'"

Beyond the reactions stemming from the effects of COVID-19, the other thing that impacted Bliffen's initial reaction is time, she said.

"There's so much that we have to cover in English that it's a little, it can be overwhelming to think that we have to add one more thing," Bliffen said. "I'm kind of glad that our department chair kind of phrased it like 'you already do this in your classroom. So, just take what you're already doing and make sure that it follows the guidelines that are given to you' instead of being like 'now you have to add something else to what you're already doing.'"

Bliffen wasn't the only teacher who reacted this way.

Mark Klaisner, the president of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, which covers all 38 offices across the state, said as the president of IARSS, he has become the

primary conduit to legislatures and the Illinois State Board of Education. He found a lot of teachers were left without guidance and faced a big post-Covid workload.

Klaisner said there is no guideline or outline to follow.

He said the law is clear when it says media literacy is mandatory.

"However, it doesn't say how, where, when or who is checking up on it, or who is going to be following up with the accountability piece," Klaisner said "So, it's my perception that it's somewhat on the back burner. The ROEs and ISCs are trying to find ways to provide both training and materials that would be useful to our district.

Klaisner said the last three years have been pretty intense, leaving many districts having to deal with a lot of unforeseen things that came along with COVID-19.

"It's my perception, and this is just me speaking, but it's my perception that districts have not done much with [media literacy]," he said. "Frequently when I

have asked, who knows about these requirements, digital literacy isn't on the top of their priority list. There are a number of other things, teacher shortage, for instance, the whole health and wellness arena, even more so social and emotional learning. A lot of people have been through a lot of trauma the last few years, and so, I've heard districts talk much more about that. If I bring up digital literacy, typically the response that I'm getting is 'we'll get around to that when we have time.' Or 'has ISBE developed specific learning standards for specific grade levels or ages that we are supposed to implement?' They are looking for us to kind of hold their hand and guide them, and there isn't anything very substantive to help with."

How teachers learned of the literacy requirement

Bliffen said she was made aware of the new requirement by her department chair who let the department know it was coming.

"Whenever it passed, they filled us in and the school board just asked that all of us go ahead and have a media literacy unit ready," Bliffen said. "And so we each kind of took our own take on it and used it for our own classes, but then we shared it within the department so that way all of us could kind of be on the same page of where we are at. So, I think we are all kind of taking the same approach. Some people are going in more depth, but for the most part, we kind of have the same plan."

Bliffen said MVTHS's school board is really good about figuring out what is necessary and following through.

"So, if the school board was just like 'hey, this needs to happen' and so we all just sort of jump on board with whatever the board says that," she said.

Raymond Salazar, an English teacher at John Hancock College Prep High School, said he did not hear about Illinois' media literacy law.

"I think it's a necessary requirement," Salazar said. "I think that as teachers prepare students for the 21st century, we need to make sure that we incorporate learning experiences that address the visual, audio and written texts that students are going to encounter, so we can help create awareness about accuracy of information, so that we can also build student's confidence in themselves to make decisions about the information that they access, that is given or thrown at them. I think it really fits with what a 21st century literacy education should include."

Still, Salazar said he believes, in general, sometimes decisions that affect teachers don't include teachers.

"So, they don't include us in the decision-making level enough, and then there is a poor communication chain in general to get

information to teachers," he said.

Salazar said he has not seen anything from JHCPHS's school district in regards to this new requirement.

"I'm on my own with this," he said.

Most of the time, the lessons that teachers are dealing with controversial issues, if they exist, Salazar said, are really superficial.

"They talk about 'oh, discuss this situation, ask students what they think about it, what they feel about it,'" Salazar said. "That doesn't get them anywhere. I make sure that we ground our media literacy experiences in real rhetorical concepts that they can apply not only in this situation, but they can learn something from it. So, any time that they have to analyze someone's reaction to a controversial event, they can use these strategies to ask 'how effective is this?'"

Despite not hearing about the new requirement, Salazar said it fits with what he has been doing for the majority of his teaching career, incorporating current events and media into the classroom.

"So, whenever something big happens in the world, I find a text that we ground ourselves in," he said. "Then, students engage in some type of learning experience where they understand the text first and understand the situation, understand what's going on. They take a look at different perspectives on the situation, and they ultimately make an evaluation on the text in some way. We ground ourselves in classic questions of rhetorical analysis, and it's simply 'how effective is this text in achieving whatever goal it wants to achieve?'"

Nick Johnson, an English teacher at Belleville West High School, said there has not been anything done at the school level in regards to this new requirement. He said the teachers have never had any curriculum advisor from above, school or district wide, saying anything about media literacy.

"It is only coming from my department chair," Johnson said.

Johnson said his school district is very unusual. The district has someone who is in charge of curriculum and professional development, but is also the superintendent of special services, he said.

"So, there's almost too much under her purview to really focus on that," Johnson said. "So, what instead the structure lends itself better to giving the department chairs also double as curriculum leaders. So, our department chair, John Lodle, has been really like on the daily, he has been sending out articles and possible things. A few people here and there have been sharing slideshows and lessons. So, he's really taken the lead on that for us and for the English department's media literacy requirement. I'm going to be perfectly honest, I'm ignorant to the, I don't know whether that was a

media literacy requirement across all the curriculum, but I assumed it was just an English curriculum requirement, but I really don't know. I was just told we have to do it this year and I was like 'okay, I will make it happen.'"

Johnson said though he thought it was an ELA standard, he now knows it is a school wide standard. He said there is not yet an adopted system-wide approach to teach media literacy.

"That does make me a little frustrated that this has been dumped on, it feels as though it has been dumped on the English department," Johnson said. "However, I have no idea what they're talking about in social studies. I would assume that they are talking about it as well, but you know, I'm just in this silo in this particular school system we're in. So, that's interesting."

Because of autonomy in the department, teachers at BWHS don't have a unified curriculum at this point, Johnson said.

However, the department has been contributing ideas and some even lessons in their senior English chat that can be used as they want, he said.

"But we did decide that we would do it all in the first semester to keep it consistent," Johnson said.

Johnson said it is an important skill to learn, it's just really tricky. Having taught media for many years, the media landscape has evolved completely, he said.

"Kids don't even consume media the same way they used to," Johnson said. "They don't even really watch the news. They can learn about the world and what's going on, but it's typically through TikTok or something else. They don't necessarily turn on the tv and watch the news, rarely. There's not even this awareness of some of the things that we think are important that we know that are like media, headlines that are misleading, and convincing older generations to share disinformation. It's just something they don't relate to. They're like 'yeah, that's not me.' So, it's been interesting bringing it back into the senior curriculum. Number one because they're all consumers of media but the kinds of content we want them to learn about, how to identify fake news and all of that, they seem a little disinterested, but I've got them finally now we're a little bit into our project because this is regular English 7-8. These aren't people who signed up for a media class."

Kalani Aydt, a social studies teacher at Centralia High School, said she heard about Illinois' new requirement through a civics education newsletter that informs people about new requirements in the state and how to implement it into curriculum in different ways.

Aydt said she heard about the requirement "early on."

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The Illinois State Capitol Building in Springfield, Illinois.

Photo by Emily Cooper-Pierce

Aydt said she remembers thinking that the requirement is a good thing. With the rise in social media and the way in which information is consumed, she said it's really important to learn how to be responsible consumers of information.

"And I think that when we think of media, we're typically thinking of professional journalists or newscasters or something like that, and that's not the case anymore," she said. "I think the definition of media has even expanded to include us [educators] and what we post or the information that we put out there. I do think it's important that we understand that we are putting out quality information or truthful information because what we have to say really matters to the people in our digital circles at the very least, if not our personal social circles."

Initially, Aydt said it was a lot more challenging to fit everything in.

"Just like with any new requirement trying to rework what we have with the

available time, it can be a struggle, but in my classes just the nature of civics keeping up with current events is always very important," she said. "Illinois also has a current and controversial [issues] requirement within their civics law that is important to tie media literacy in with that."

Aydt said she thinks most teachers see that this requirement is not difficult to actually implement.

Implementing

The mistake that English teachers make many times is that they make classes literature based all year, Salazar said.

"Now, I'm not opposed to teaching literature," he said. "I think the problem is we can't just give student literature to read. They can't be reading fiction all year because my question is 'what are they producing if they are reading so much literature?' The goal of literacy instruction should be that students should be engaged

with texts that they are then going to produce responsibly in some ways. If we want them to produce an article for an online publication, then they should be reading articles that are well written or maybe not so they can evaluate and see why they are not well written. It can't just be fiction 100 percent of the time all year all four years of high school. Students need a variety of non-fiction and real-world experiences that connect to 21st century literacy needs."

Salazar said something that is very helpful is visuals, like an advertisement.

"We looked at the Army. They have a new campaign recently to attract millennials," he said. "They are trying to attract them by promoting leadership and presenting the military as a way to develop leadership skills if these millennials who don't feel like they're getting them in their careers post college. We look at the photographs, we look at the fonts, we look at the colors, we look at the arrangement, we look at the positioning of things. And then again, students have to decide, 'Here is what the text is deciding to do now, how effective is it in achieving those goals?'"

With controversial events and real-world situations, Salazar said "it's literally one day to the next that I stop the class, and we bring it in and say 'alright, let's actually apply what we've been learning to this context, this real-world situation that has been happening.'"

For example, Salazar said when Trump gave his speech from the Oval Office in favor of building the wall, he stopped his class. He said his class watched the speech.

"I asked students to give him a grade," he said. "How effective is this in communicating the idea that we should build a wall, but the big question there was who was his audience because when we study rhetoric the big question is always 'who is this intended for?' And what we all realized is that his speech was not to the nation, his speech was to his supporters. So, students wrote over and over 'as much as I don't want to, I have to give him an 'A' because it achieved its goals for his audience.'"

In addition to grounding his students in texts, Salazar said the goal is always that they have to produce something.

"Two to three times a quarter, they have to produce something that can live and breathe outside of our classroom," he said.

Salazar said the one thing he doesn't do is the evaluation of sources over and over.

"I mean, I think that's an overkill," Salazar said. "I think many times teachers feel like that's the lesson, like 'let's look at the credibility over and over and over.' I think students get more out of actually creating content that is credible, that is accurate where they're also transparent about their intentions behind it and motivation behind it, but I think there is overkill when it comes

down to 'let's evaluate sources.' There is some of that, but that can't be the ultimate goal. That should be a small part of a lesson."

Five key questions to media literacy

Johnson said he didn't read the bill, but has previously taught a semester-long English elective for seniors called mass media where he focused on media literacy. After COVID-19, scheduling became easier to not offer electives to seniors, but rather just call the class English 7-8 – senior English, he said.

"So, while I was bummed I wouldn't teach mass media, it just coincided with there being a media literacy requirement to be in the senior curriculum," Johnson said. "So, I was like 'okay, great, I get to incorporate some of that stuff in that semester long class.' So, that's kind of where I'm at in a general sense with incorporating media literacy into my class."

Johnson said though he has enough content to fill a semester and then some, in his English 7-8 course, he spends half a semester on media literacy.

"I'm sure I'm spending way more time on it than other teachers but just because I have the resources," Johnson said. "I'll spend half a semester on media literacy, but still being able to get the other requirements in. So, 'okay, we have to do a research paper. Great, it'll be a media research paper. We have to read a book. Okay, we're going to read a book about media literacy.'"

Johnson said that's where he feels that it's not just squeezed in there and shoved at the end. It was something that was constantly on their minds, he said.

Johnson said he started a media literacy unit full throttle beginning in the middle of October. He uses "True or False, A CIA analyst guide to spotting fake news" by Cindy Otis.

"So, pairing that book, 'True or False' with the project, which is the market research, developing a product and then ultimately creating a video ad that they can do in teams," Johnson said. "So, I feel like that'll take a couple more weeks, which doesn't give much time for anything else but I'll figure out some mini unit. What sort of makes sense since we've been talking about media is then they'll be exhausted with fake news, like that whole concept. I think I'll have them do a mini research project to find another problem that exists in the media, and that might be something that just fills the rest of the semester. So, I see it going clear to the end of the semester. And we do have a requirement that seniors do a research paper and even if it's a mini research paper, I'm fine with that."

Johnson said he spends more attention on his students creating media in a way that shows they can think critically.

"You cannot always tell what students are thinking about the media they consume, but when they create a product, it becomes evident," Johnson said.

Although his students know how to create media content, Johnson said there are still some things left to teach his students to elevate their media content.

Johnson said he has equipment that he can borrow for his English class to use, but there isn't necessarily a lab available for them to edit their videos. So, his English students don't get to use the professional equipment in the lab.

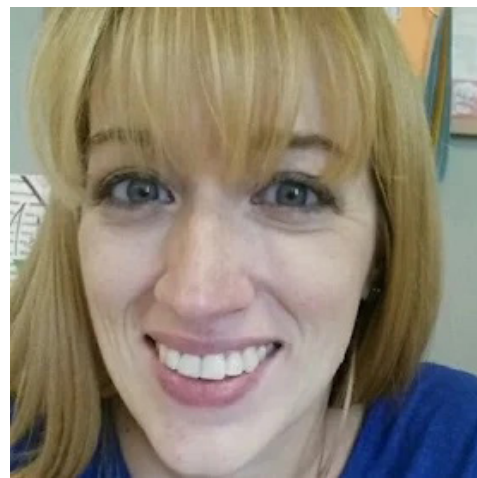
"They all have phones. So, they can videotape on their phones, but it makes it kind of challenging for me to instruct them how to edit when I may only have familiarity with one, the iPhone...so, there's some challenges with creation, but there's always something to get around it with," Johnson said. "We can adapt."

Johnson said he develops things on his own from lots of different places, but one resource he has used is from a colleague of his that put together a presentation introducing students to media literacy.

"It goes through the five key questions of media literacy like: who created this message, whose opinions are omitted from it and there are a few other questions that they consider," Johnson said. "There was a name on it, I would certainly look back at that slide show, and I would go back to that author and see what other resources they have because one of the things that evolved in very, very recent times is I remember there are four tenants of media literacy was 'to be able to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media' but now they've added 'and act.' So, the fifth thing is to act. So, I've been thinking recently what that act means. It, of course, could mean to be an activist to take action from the media you consume and being able to take action knowing that you were able to discern the information is correct and valuable to just inspire others with a call to action in your media, or something like that. There's just different ways to consider that fifth piece. From that author, she would be a resource, but I jump to the internet [and books]."

Johnson said speaking for himself, when he sees something that speaks to what his class is talking about and could spark a great conversation, he brings it in.

"There's definitely a big push in our school to have discussions around equity, particularly racial equity, and when we see a news article that talks about bias and crime statistics, in reporting a crime statistic, on John Oliver or something, 'hey, this is something that I can bring in,'" Johnson said. "There is some language in it, but I



Raquel Bliffen, an English teacher at Mt. Vernon Township High School.

Photo courtesy of Raquel Bliffen

think bringing in some things that you see and you identify with. How you can find one opinion or one news story presented this way on one particular site, you're going to find the news slanted a different way on a different site. Just being able to present those things to students to have them pick out the differences and what language is being used to kind of encode a specific POV with each of them. So, the autonomy allows us to bring in the things that we are energized about which makes us a little bit more passionate, but I can see it being a challenge for teachers who don't look at the world that way as much or don't consume as much media. They really rather not talk about things like that that maybe make them uncomfortable to talk about, things that might relate to political conversations, who knows."

Show don't tell

Aydt said with implementing media literacy into her class with freshmen, she has to show them and not just tell them along the way.

"So, I introduce [media literacy] pretty early whenever we are talking, when we are getting into our civics semester and it's not necessarily a unit, it is more of an ongoing process that happens throughout the semester and just kind of builds upon itself," she said.

Aydt said as she got more comfortable with different resources, she looked for things that are engaging to her students that might have an impact on their immediate world view.

"I personally receive a daily newsletter in my email from The Skimm, but it kind of condenses major news topics from around the world every day Monday-Friday," she said. "It gives you links to a wide variety of news sources to kind of go into further explanation, and I like that because it really does summarize major events that we don't

Continued on next page

want to ignore."

Due to the nature of civics, especially with the current and controversial issues requirement, Adyt said she has to constantly be changing a lot of her curriculum. So, whenever she sees something that can fit into where her students are in the curriculum, she just goes with it, like a class read and discussion.

A lot of times, Adyt said she'll have her students read an article and then try to decipher what they read by summarizing what they think are the most important takeaways from the article. She said she does this to get them to express their opinions to see where they are at and how well they are digesting the media.

"It can go really any way," she said. "I'm really flexible in the classroom which is, I've always seen as a benefit. Some other people might have a different approach to it and that is perfectly fine because you just have to do what works best for you."

Adding to an earlier media literacy course

In addition to teaching honors English and poetry, Bliffen said she teaches performance studies which is ethos, logos and pathos and using the internet as a source.

"So, I'm lucky in that I kind of already had [media literacy]," Bliffen said. "I just sort of fine-tuned it so that way the kids knew what the term 'media literacy' meant because they were learning what they needed to know, but they didn't know it was called media literacy and I wanted them to understand the moral implications of media literacy as well because that seems to be a big focus of the bill."

Bliffen said since she started at MVTHS in 2016, it has been part of the curriculum a little bit.

"I just kind of emphasized it more by my second year, and last year whenever it was required, I used it more on purpose, you know purposely said 'media literacy is what we're covering today,'" she said.

Bliffen said she uses the internet a lot as a general jumping off point.

"Anytime I'm not sure about what I need to do for it, I just look at the actual wording of the bill, which was emailed to us whenever this all started," Bliffen said. "And then, I kind of use that to make sure that I'm doing everything that I should."

Bliffen said the first thing she did was read the wording of the requirements.

"Then, I just looked at a lesson I thought already kind of fit that, and most of my lessons deal with online research for performance studies because kids have to give speeches that are researched, so I just used it as how can they responsibly research information and cite the sources," Bliffen said. "So, I took that existing lesson,

and then used the phrasing 'media literacy' within it. Instead of just teaching it and then when they give their speech looking for that, I monitor that much more closely as they are composing it. So, every day I'm looking for the fluidity of their perusing of the internet. How are they citing sources? Do they know terminology? Things like that. So, it's much more like 'yeah, I'm assessing they know what they're doing.' There's a little quiz at one point that we take to make sure that they know, but I just want to make sure that they actually know it in everyday use. That's kind of how I formatted it."

Bliffen said she teaches media literacy just as a subject for about a week.

"Then, throughout the rest of the semester media literacy is built into all of the lessons," she said. "So, it's sort of like teach it at the beginning, and then reteach and gauge for understanding for the rest of the semester."

Bliffen said she starts off the week of media literacy as a subject by doing a slideshow presentation, 'what is media literacy' so that her students know what the phrase is.

"Then, we have kind of an open discussion about how they feel that their skills measure up to what is expected," she said. "Do you know how to navigate? Do you know how to cite sources and what are the consequences of not citing sources correctly? How can you use the internet responsibly? After we do that, they have to put it into practice. So, they have to find some research and then cite it within a speech. Then, I look at it and say 'yes, this is correct' or 'no, you need to work on it.' Whenever they give the speech, they also get written and verbal feedback from me on how they approached it because sometimes they write it okay, but then whenever it comes time to deliver it it's not accurate or something like that."

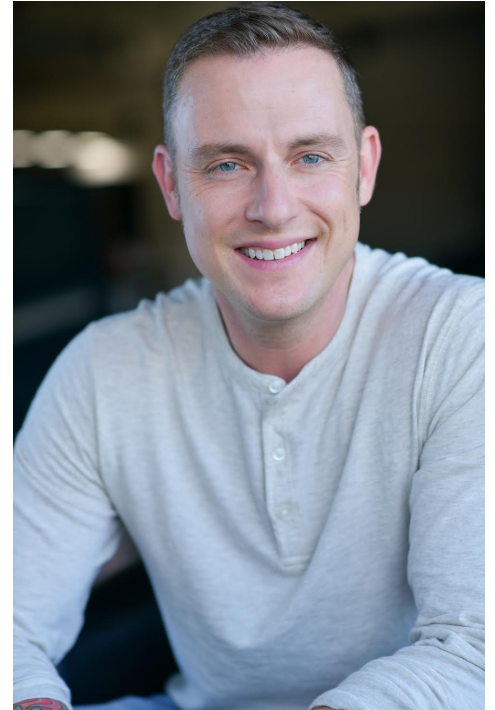
When she first heard the phrase 'media literacy,' she said she thought it meant being able to navigate the internet.

"But what, the feeling that I'm getting, is that it's really just anything to do with media at all and the umbrella is so wide that you can hit so many things within it," she said. "So, I think that it's kind of moving towards the kids using it in their everyday vernacular, especially whenever they get to the professional level. I don't know what college looks like whenever it comes to media literacy, but they're really pushing that here. So, it seems like it's going to be important in the next few years."

At the end of that unit, sometimes she'll do a quiz, Bliffen said. But she said she believes the discussion portion is much more beneficial.

"It can be as much as a two minute question and answer session, or we'll take a whole class where students come in with questions prepared," she said. "So, I feel like

that's really important because my voice doesn't really matter as much as theirs when it comes to what they're learning. They get more out of it if a peer says it than if I say it. I try to use that to my advantage as much as possible whenever teaching things like that. So far, it has been okay."



Nick Johnson, an English teacher at Belleville West High School.

Photo courtesy of Nick Johnson

Variation of professional development

Salazar said he has not received professional development on media literacy.

"I'll be honest, most of the stuff that I do with media literacy is based on my own experience...I understand the role that media plays in my life, and I react to it," Salazar said. "So, that's kind of been my professional development."

BWHS also has not offered any professional development on media literacy, Johnson said.

"Professional development is a really touchy subject for me," Johnson said. "We are not given any time. When we have any professional development, in my building in our system, we're given no time to actually digest it, then to work on it and adapt it to our curriculum. We're just expected to do it. But there has been no media literacy PD, right now. I think that would be absolutely something that we should have and I would be happy to lead it."

Bliffen said MVTHS has a Teachers Pay Teachers license, an educator license, and were told to use that resource if they wanted to do research.

It was pretty cut and dry, Bliffen said. The school district provided teachers with some online resources, she said.

Bliffen said whenever there is professional

development once a month, there are different sessions that teachers can go to and one was media literacy.

"I think they did that a couple of times so that way anybody that hasn't had the chance to go to it could go to the next one, but I think that was last year," Bliffen said. "I don't think any media literacy has been offered this year. Keep in mind that everybody at this point has already created lessons for it and feels confident, but last year whenever they were still figuring it out, there were a lot of people that took the opportunity to take the media literacy class or PD."

Bliffen said it was basic.

"It was like 'this is what you know, these are the skills that we're trying to teach, these are the things that you need to cover, who has questions. We'll give you time to work on it and then look it over.' I think at that point, I had already made my lesson and I just wanted to go to make sure I was doing everything that I should before I turned it into my department chair," Bliffen said. "I think now this might have just been as a department that we did this because they asked the English department to follow through on it. So, I can't remember exactly."

In addition to the professional development, Bliffen said another teacher just completed her master's and did a class on media literacy, so that teacher provided lessons.

"It was really open to whoever needed to talk about it or ask questions could, sort of like an open door policy about that," Bliffen said. "Then, once I created the lesson, I just sent it to my department chair. He looked it over, and he was like 'yes, this meets the

requirements or no it doesn't.' And for me it did. So, I was like 'great.' Then, I just kind of started teaching it once that class became a thing. I think all of the teachers are trying to incorporate media literacy in all of their lessons because they know how important it is to get our kids to be prepared for using the internet professionally as opposed to on a social level. So, that has been interesting trying to integrate that into our everyday lessons."

Aydt said she was exposed to two professional developments.

"They were absolutely helpful," she said. "I started noticing that the way I was presenting information started to shift a little bit. Instead of just blindly handing my kids articles, I started kind of discussing how the article was set up. Where do we see factual evidence? Where do we see opinion that could possibly come in? Then, kind of talking to my students about does this source have bias? Is it okay to have bias? How do we intelligently consume information even when we know there is a bias? It's okay to have that bias, but consuming the information we have to know, that bias is there. So, we can kind of take this information with a grain of salt."

The Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers

Klaisner, president of the Regional Superintendents of Schools, said that because of the lack of guidelines on implementing the media ethics requirement, "That's why we, as the ROEs, are trying to take the lead," he said.

"We'd love to have some things in place

for the summer so that we could provide not only materials and resources but actually some training as well. Something that has been very interesting is the ROEs have been very involved with social and emotional learning. Almost always, social and emotional learning lends itself toward media literacy because of the overlap with social media, that kids are being bullied over social media or they're posting things that forever will be online. So, there's a piece of your social and emotional discussion that almost immediately starts to talk about media literacy and how you use social media, what you access and what kind of information you share and so forth. So, we have found ourselves through the social emotional lens also doing some of the work."

Klaisner said up until this point, all that has been done is inform the districts of the requirement.

He said they do this on a routine basis. Following a legislative session, and into the fall, Klaisner said they make sure the districts have updates of new mandates, changes, laws, requirements.

"We're held responsible for making sure that districts are in compliance with school code and so forth," he said. "So, we frequently provide updates to our superintendents or through our other networks and each year we have a compliance document that we update to make sure that it includes the requirements. Then, we use that mechanism to let districts know. It's typically part of a list. Media literacy did not stand on its own as one item but several items that were new or signed into law next year and so forth."

A student reporter gets the first look at Illinois' struggling media literacy law

By Emily Cooper Pierce

Illinois enacted the nation's first public school media literacy law just shy of two years ago. Since then the press has mostly ignored it, teachers have struggled to figure out what it requires, educators have received little training and no one is checking to see if students are learning to be more media literate.

I'm the first journalist who has deeply looked into how that requirement has been implemented, traveling around the state talking to educators and seeing how the new requirement is playing out in classrooms from Chicago to Mt. Vernon to Belleville.

At the time I started this project – sparked by a GJR article by Emily Olivares of Columbia College, I had high hopes. I still do.

But the high hopes at the start were drastically different from what they are now.

Before starting this project, I had imagined that this new mandate would be a full semester course like that of the required computer literacy course or even government class. My thought process was that at the end of the semester, students would turn in a test that acknowledges what they learned.

That's how I saw it. But what it actually is is vastly different.

When starting a project like this, the largest I had ever worked on, I had hoped to talk with everyone involved with the bill, including the legislators.

That is needless to say, ambitious. Though I spoke with a handful of

legislators that had a part in this law, I had limitations to talking with some.

I had high hopes of countless visits to schools across Illinois to look at how the law is being implemented.

Very shortly, I realized how that was overly ambitious. Still I was able to capture the reality of this new law.

What started from a shared idea turned into a mandated piece of legislation for Illinois public high schools.

Let's be honest here, the education system in the United States can use a lot of work, a lot. This mandate is no different.

This mandate lacks funding, oversight and resources.

Higher-ups as far as the president

Continued on next page

of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, Mark Klaisner, are still searching for ways in which their offices can better support educators across the state to implement this new requirement. Educators are still trying to approach implementing media literacy the best way they know how, regardless of whether it fits exactly what the law expresses in its language.

Media and thus media literacy is such a fluid topic. What we see from our screens often depends on the algorithms tailored to our viewing. One could ultimately chalk it up to a perspective-dependent topic.

Therefore, implementing media literacy in the classroom is never going to look exactly alike, nor will it ever be the exact same in a state like Illinois – a state that is home to a big city like Chicago and small towns like SIU's very own Carbondale.

From my months of reporting and gathering information on the topic of media literacy, specifically in Illinois, this new requirement is an ambitious one with seemingly little oversight.

The law itself is written in a fluid way to support the versatile nature of media literacy. Media is involved at every end of our lives. The law is written so that this "unit" can fit into classes across the board, from social studies to PE.

The lack of oversight stems from the continual questioning of who is going to help regulate this mandate.

"There is no media literacy police out there that will go to every school and say 'how are you doing this?' There is no means for that," Michael Spikes, Ph.D. candidate at Northwestern University, Media Literacy Now's current Illinois chapter leader and a co-founder of IMLC. He said "Those are limitations, but I think those are also limitations imposed based on the structure of how schools are run in the state..."

With that fluidity and lack of oversight, educators are left unsure of how to proceed.

Klaisner said from his perspective, educators have not done much with the media literacy requirement.

"Frequently when I have asked, who knows about these requirements, digital literacy isn't on the top of their priority list," he said. "There are a number of other things, teacher shortage, for instance, the whole health and wellness arena, even more so social and emotional learning. A lot of people have been through a lot of trauma the last few years, and so, I've heard districts talk much more about that. If I bring up digital literacy, typically the response that I'm getting is 'we'll get around to that when we have time.' Or 'has ISBE developed specific learning standards for specific grade levels or ages that we are supposed to implement?' They are

“Media literacy is not going to be a “unit” in students’ school days. It is going to be a continual conversation for ages to come.”

looking for us to kind of hold their hand and guide them, and there isn't anything very substantive to help with."

The problems that are either already occurring or prone to occur stem from this lack of oversight and communication.

With multiple new requirements each school year, educators fail to know, often even at the bare minimum hear, about new requirements.

Media literacy is not going to be a "unit" in students' school days. It is going to be a continual conversation for ages to come. This new requirement, though, is a good start.

Over the last couple of decades, as the internet grew, schools addressed media literacy in a couple of different ways, Klaisner said.

"Some felt a tug of liability that said 'we have to protect our students. Put in filters, put in rules, put in policies, put in firewalls, make sure you're protecting the children, so they don't get hurt,'" he said. "And the other school of thought was, 'no, the internet is there, and as soon as a student walks out of the door, they're in that world on their smart device.' And so, you can't protect them all the time. What you need to do is teach children how to make informed decisions. So, teaching them how to manage their space, how to stay away from harmful sites and how to correctly analyze the sources they're getting."

Klaisner said those two debates, those two camps, sometimes overlap, but typically schools and districts took one or the other.

"So now, we find ourselves with mandated media literacy, and the question there is, 'I'm not quite sure how that plays out,'" he said. "Like which of those two camps are we taking on? Personally, I think that it's relatively complicated. We know kids are on their devices until all hours of the morning. I think children are best served by helping them determine quality and set boundaries by being careful, but we have to do some of both."

As ambitious as this mandate may

seem after witnessing it firsthand for months, at the core, it offers something all of us need to consider: How does media influence our lives, individually and collectively? How does the information we see, hear, witness, etc., affect how we think and operate?

We are at a turning point in human history, with technologies like AI coming to the forefront.

How can media literacy better prepare us for what is to come or may already be here?

The high hopes I have today stem from the versatility of this new mandate, the determination of the teachers I spoke with and was able to observe in their classroom and the doors opening in other states.

Just a few weeks ago, New Jersey passed a new law on information literacy. Though not directly tied to Illinois, it is encouraging to see more states bring media literacy to light in their state's education for the next generation.

Illinois' law is ambitious because it's in its preliminary stages.

It has the potential to be something good, but good things take time. There is still a lot more work needed to be done before it gets to that point. Yet, there is a lot of hope for that, too.

Nick Johnson, an English teacher at Belleville West High School, said a next step for media literacy implementation at BWHS would be to develop a curriculum where there are specific objectives for how they're met, like cognitive affirmative assessments or tests to identify concepts that teachers provide to measure students.

"There's no unity, but I just make most of my project-based," Johnson said. "So, I can see that you got the concept because that should've been your end product in this 30-second video, or I understand you got the concept of viral fake news headlines because you can write a viral fake news headline. There's different things that I'm able to see through the work, but we don't have any unified curriculum at this point. I definitely think there are things you can measure. Your media literacy skills are measurable."

Johnson said he has learned that teachers cannot assume that students consume information or news in any particular way.

"Building assignments around these assumptions doesn't work," he said. "Taking time to learn about how students consume information and news is a really helpful entry point to approach media literacy."

'Trust Project' sets standards to help readers assess credibility of journalism

By Donna Vestal

Throughout my career as a newspaper and public radio editor, I always referred to myself as "proud journalist." Proud meaning that it was an honor to serve the public by communicating truth – and, yes, holding power accountable.

But public perception – distrust and even loathing of journalists and their work -- has clearly challenged that pride in my chosen profession.

That's a big reason why I jumped at the chance to help implement The Trust Project initiative at Investigate Midwest, where I am a member of the board of directors. My experience over the last six months has reinforced my belief that journalists must be willing to question their own assumptions and be transparent even when it's uncomfortable.

The Trust Project is a global network of news organizations (huge and small) that has developed standards to help readers assess the quality and credibility of journalism. The Trust Project was founded by award-winning journalist Sally Lehrman and is hosted by Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. It is funded by Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Google, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Markkula Foundation.

In the Midwest, you can find the Trust Project's certification of best practices at Wisconsin Watch and several small rural newspapers. The nonprofit Investigate Midwest earned its Trust Project credentials in March along with a cohort that included the Dallas Free Press and Texas Tribune.

Investigate Midwest, which focuses on big ag, recognized that it needed to be proactive to fortify audience respect for its in-depth reporting.

"We want our readers to know they can trust our work," said Investigate Midwest Executive Director and Managing Editor Erin Orr. "Readers are bombarded with disinformation and thousands of sources. We hold our newsgathering to the highest standards, so readers can confidently come to our site and see how we operate."

Even though Investigate Midwest already had thorough fact-checking and correction procedures in place, Trust Project certification meant reviewing and questioning every facet of the organization. That's difficult to accomplish when you're also trying to cover the news, so I came in to guide the process.

The Trust Project hinges on a

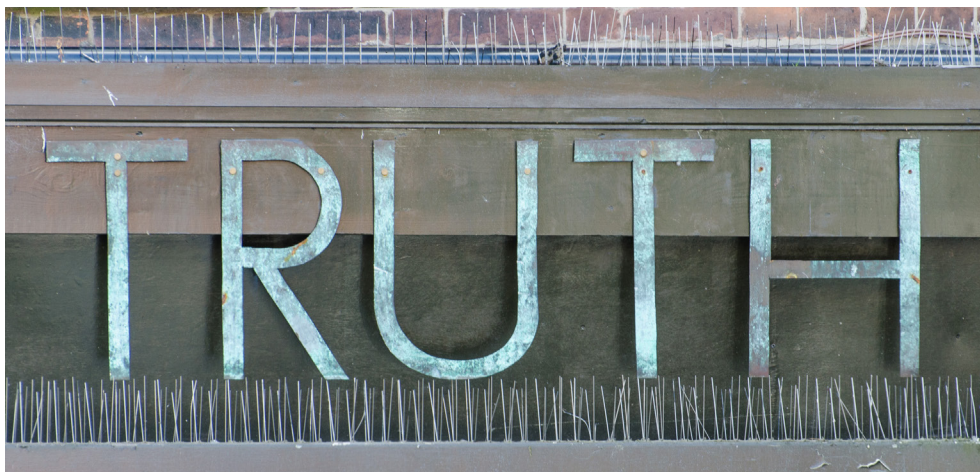


Photo by Tim Abbott via Flickr

commitment to a core set of eight Trust Indicators. Here's how The Trust Project frames the elements for the news consumer:

- Best Practices: Do you know who's behind the news?
- Journalism Expertise: Who made this?
- Labels: News, opinion, or what?
- References: What's their source?
- Methods: How as it built?
- Locally Sourced: Do they know you? Your community?
- Diverse News: Who's in the news? Who's missing?
- Actionable Feedback: Does this news site listen to me?

Like Investigate Midwest, you might already be able to point to examples of how you provide this information to your audience. The difficulty is ensuring consistency and clarity. That is, building the answers to these questions into the structure of your daily work and requiring a commitment from the staff.

For example, The Trust Project requires that articles be labeled as news, opinion, investigative, sponsored, etc. That means assessing all possibilities and defining them, and then making sense of this for readers.

On the Best Practices front, Investigate Midwest had to add a corrections page listing all corrections in one place in addition to the policy of a prominent correction at the top of an article. No journalist likes seeing a list like that. But transparency like this is critical to building trust, Trust Project research shows.

Publishing a list of references (beyond just links within an article) is another addition for Investigate Midwest – one that I love. For an investigative news outlet, this detailed proof of the research trail can

be quite profound, and it can also lead to closer examination of sourcing. Building the requirement into a reporters' work process helps alleviate the tracking burden.

Another side benefit has been the acknowledgement of reporters' work and credentials through 'behind the story' explanations and structured bios that focus on relevant experience and expertise.

One of the biggest difficulties for us came on the tech side. The Trust Project details means building new elements and links on our Word Press site. And without a developer on staff, this final step became more challenging than expected.

I was fortunate to be somewhat of an outsider in implementing The Trust Project at Investigate Midwest. I ended up writing an internal policies document for the staff, something that I hope will help them adhere to The Trust Project indicators for years to come.

I would encourage any news organization to evaluate if The Trust Project process would be a fit. Lehrman says renewed funding from Craig Newmark Philanthropies will allow The Trust Project to work with more news outlets. Just be prepared to put in the work from the newsroom to the tech team to the marketing.

You do get an outside coach, which helps keep things moving over the several months from start to finish.

Now that Investigate Midwest transparently shares its trustworthy reporting practices, my overriding feeling is ... pride. Pride in my profession, and pride in the journalists who fight for the truth. I'm a little sad that we have to prove it, but maybe that makes us stronger and better for it.



Missouri State Capitol.

Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Missouri legislature targets Sunshine Act requirements passed by voters

By Don Corrigan

Even as some in the Missouri Legislature try to unravel the initiative process, they also are trying to undo "the will of the people" on previously passed voter initiatives on government transparency.

A bill to undo some of the government transparency requirements passed by voters five years ago in the Clean Missouri initiative is advancing in the legislature. The bill would allow lawmakers to hold back records from the public and the news media.

Any record of a state legislator or staff pertaining to "legislation or the legislative process" could be closed off to public scrutiny except for those offered during a public meeting or involving a lobbyist. The legislation is sponsored by Sen. Andrew Koenig, R-Ballwin.

According to Koenig, the bill will allow legislators more freedom to discuss proposals and to "think out loud" when

taking up legislation. Sunshine law defenders said the bill is a move by lawmakers to carve up a constitutional mandate approved by Missouri voters.

An outspoken critic of the bill is David Roland, director of litigation at the libertarian nonprofit Freedom Center of Missouri.

"The Freedom Center is for transparency. We're for initiative power," said Roland. "We think the more people know about what is going on in their government, the better. And the more power we place with the people to govern themselves, the better."

Roland said the legislature has not been happy that the voters want more openness and clarity about how laws are made. However, he said lawmakers need to abide by what the voters decided and not try to shield themselves from public oversight.

The Koenig bill changes the definition of public meeting in a manner that Roland and

other critics argue will allow governmental entities such as school boards and city councils to discuss public issues behind closed doors.

According to Roland, the new language is an invitation to government bodies to ignore transparency requirements under the 50-year-old Sunshine law guaranteeing that the public has access to government records and meetings.

Roland said that because the Koenig measure alters certain provisions in the state constitution, it will have to go to a vote of the people to be enacted. He said he was not sure how "it could be sold" to the public.

"I am pretty confident that Missouri voters are going to reject this when it is submitted to them for a vote," said Roland. "I am not overly concerned."

Roland said the legislature should recognize that open meetings and requests for public records are not "an abuse" of the system. He said it's also not "an abuse" of

the system when the public turns to the initiative process.

"I have to laugh when the legislature says the initiative process is too easy for the public to get things on the ballot," said Roland. "It's not easy at all, but people make that effort when they feel lawmakers are not hearing what they want.

"We have seen over the last score of years a certain disconnect between the people and the legislature," added Roland. "Because of that disconnect, the people are stepping up on issue after issue, and the legislature is not happy."

The Freedom Center's Roland studied law and religion at Vanderbilt University, where he received his law degree and a master's degree in theology in 2004. While at Vanderbilt, Roland wrote for the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center.

Environmentalists' Concerns

Environmentalists are also expressing concerns over the legislature meddling with past initiatives passed by a vote of the people in Missouri. They are also concerned

over lawmakers' attempts to effectively nullify the current initiative process.

"Legislatures are charged with passing laws, and in this they are supposed to represent the voters," said Henry Robertson, a St. Louis environmental lawyer. "But when they fail to do this, the voters have the right to assert their will by bypassing the legislature."

Robertson said the initiative process is consistent with the principle that the will of the people is the supreme law. Robertson speculated that any number of issues could arise concerning protection of water, air and land and addressing climate change.

"A current example of this is the legislature's denial of local control on subjects like public health ordinances to protect against concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) or dictating what local governments can or can't put in their building codes, even when we have no statewide codes," Robertson explained.

"The legislature is attacking energy efficiency standards, provisions for EV charging stations, and bans on natural gas hookups in new construction," added

Robertson. "I'm not saying there are currently any initiatives planned on any of these issues – passing one is much more difficult and expensive than the legislature likes to make out."

Nevertheless, the availability of the process is vitally important, according to Robertson. He cited the example of the 1976 initiative that banned electric utilities from charging customers for construction work in progress.

Now the legislature wants to repeal the 1976 ban on charging ratepayers for construction work in progress (CWIP). This repeal would force state ratepayers to take the risk, for example, of the construction of a new nuclear reactor that's too risky for Wall Street bankers.

"The tendency for the legislature to repeal or gut initiative-passed laws is the reason initiatives usually take the form of constitutional amendments which they can't easily repeal," stressed Robertson. "They complain that initiatives are junking up the state constitution, but their hostility to the people's will has caused this situation."

Missouri legislature's history of ignoring the people's laws

By Don Corrigan

For decades the Missouri legislature has been at odds with the will of the people on a host of major issues. Legislators are unfazed. In this year's session in Jefferson City, lawmakers seem determined to codify their disdain for grassroots democracy.

Legislators have introduced a slew of proposals to effectively end state voters' use of the initiative petition process. They are intent on erecting hurdles that make it virtually impossible for residents to put issues on the statewide ballot.

It's no surprise that legislators are once again out of sync with the will of the people as they seek to nullify the process that allows for a "will of the people." It's the ultimate irony, as Missouri citizens urge them not to do it.

In January, despite overwhelming opposition – 96 percent of committee testimony opposed one such nullification bill – the Missouri House proceeded anyway to rush out approval of a bill to undermine the initiative petition process.

The Missouri House Committee on Elections and Elected Officials heard five bills on Jan. 24, and voted four of the attacks on the petition process out for consideration. The action was taken even as testimony opposing the bills ran five-to-one against the supportive comments.

In February, unhappy constituents similarly lined up, one after another, to describe the initiative petition process as "direct, pure democracy" that should not be thrown in the trash bin of Missouri statehouse history.

Missouri's media outlets also have come out swinging against the legislature's insistence on quashing the ballot initiative process. They note that voters have used the initiative process for Medicaid expansion, medical marijuana, a minimum wage hike, collective bargaining protections and use of renewable energy.

"The argument for tightening the initiative petition process is based on the mistaken assumption that it is too easy now to get a measure passed. It isn't," declared the Joplin Globe on Jan. 22. "Most measures that are attempted don't succeed.

"Medicaid expansion is a good example of why we need this," the Globe continued. "It was evident for a long time that Missourians favored this, yet it got nowhere in Jefferson City, so voters took the matter into their hands, putting the amendment on the ballot, and then approving it 53% to 47%, bypassing lawmakers altogether."

Both the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Kansas City Star have published

strongly worded opinion pieces against the legislature's moves to cripple citizen ballot initiatives. Many papers around the state, including the Columbia Missourian and Columbia Tribune, ran op-eds opposing the attacks on the voters' will.

The on-line Kansas City Beacon stressed how many important issues only saw the light of day precisely because citizens got out and worked to get signed petitions necessary to get measures on the ballot. The Beacon noted that in recent years, lawmakers have altered or jettisoned laws and constitutional changes approved by voters.

In 2010, Missourians approved a ballot measure to enact tighter restrictions on puppy mills. In the spring session following that vote, the animal protections were repealed or watered down by the state legislature.

A similar reversal came in 2020 after Missourians passed Clean Missouri, a far-reaching ethics ballot measure, which was opposed by state politicians. It was later repealed after the legislature took steps to insure a reversal.

The Kansas City Beacon noted that Missouri does not need to make it even harder for the citizens to express their will

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at the ballot box. Rather, Missouri needs to pass a bill to guard the people's will after it is articulated and affirmed by state voters. The reversals need to stop.

In its Dec. 13, 2022 piece, the Beacon cited a bill introduced by Rep. Joe Adams of St. Louis to guard against reversal of the people's will. Under Adams' bill, no measure approved by voters could be amended, watered down or repealed by state legislators.

Guarding The People's Will

Among groups opposed to plans to crush the initiative process are Missouri Healthcare for All, Missouri Realtors Association, Missouri Faith Voices, Missouri National Education Association, Metropolitan Congregations United, Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, Paragard, Missouri Alliance for Retired Americans, Missouri Sierra Club, St. Louis County NAACP and more.

The League of Women Voters (LWV) of Missouri has taken the lead in the fight to protect the will of the people as embodied in the initiative process. Opinion pieces by Marilyn McLeod, president of Missouri LWV, have appeared in publications across the state.

"The Initiative Petition is already a difficult and complicated process. Missourians resort to it only when they feel their voice isn't being heard at the capitol," McLeod stated in the Feb. 9 issue of the St. Louis Labor Tribune.

"The League is opposed to any efforts by the General Assembly to make this process even more difficult. Disgruntled politicians are ignoring regular order and the overwhelming opposition to limitations on this constitutional right as the rush to pass HJR 43," McLeod declared.

At a St. Louis rally to mark the second anniversary of the failed insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., an LWV speaker noted that some of the same Missouri lawmakers who denied the results of the 2020 presidential election are now trying to dismantle the right of state voters to make decisions.

"Too many Missouri legislators do not trust the voters – and they showed this by not accepting the results of the 2020 election – and now they are making efforts in 2023 to diminish our voice," said Angie Dunlap president of the LWV of Metro St. Louis. Gutting the initiative petition process squashes the voters' ability to use direct democracy in our state."

Dunlap said that when legislators fail time and again to address the problems of citizens, the ballot initiative is the means for restoring democracy. When the General Assembly fails to act on issues, the voters feel compelled to act.

"When lawmakers now create more

hurdles for initiatives to make the ballot – requiring more petition signatures, more districts, and more money – when they require a higher majority for the initiatives to become law ... these efforts are contrary to the idea that voters have the most important role in our democracy," Dunlap said.

Multiple bills this session are designed to prevent the passage of measures by a simple majority of state voters. Some proposals are as high as 60 percent or a two-thirds majority. The motive is all too apparent with the current furor over curtailment of women's reproductive rights.

Six other states have considered statewide ballot measures after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022. In each of these states – even heavily conservative Republican states like Kansas, Kentucky and Montana – the voters sided with abortion protections.

Right-wing legislators are desperate to keep Missouri voters from making the same kind of decisions to overturn one of the most draconian anti-choice laws in the country in the Show-Me State. These lawmakers have no interest in being shown up at the ballot box by moderate voters on the issue of reproductive rights, according to LWV.

"The November 2022 election confirmed that across the nation most people believe women should have bodily autonomy," said Dunlap. "Be resolved to let legislators know the injustice when they seek to control a women's health, and at the same time, they ignore the persistent needs of families.

"Missouri families need accessible health care; healthy food; dependable, living wage jobs; safe, modest housing; clean neighborhoods; equitable resources to enable quality schools and affordable child and senior care," said Dunlap. "And Missouri citizens may need the initiative petition to bring reproductive justice to our state."

A Republican Divide?

Current Republican lawmakers are headstrong on the need to deconstruct the petition process as abortion-rights supporters weigh a ballot proposal asking Missouri voters to address the efficacy of the state's ban on nearly all abortions, as well as the punitive measures against those who defy the ban.

Some GOP lawmakers say the petition process is not needed since voters have installed Republican supermajorities in both chambers. However, this ignores the effects of redistricting and campaign laws designed to effect those supermajorities.

Republicans like Sen. Rick Brattain of Harrisonville want the threshold for passage of ballot measures hiked to a nearly impossible two-thirds of votes cast.

He has told the Missouri media that this is necessary because "people do not know what they are voting on."

A measure sponsored by Rep. Mike Henderson, R-Bonne Terre, would require public forums to be held in all eight congressional districts in Missouri on any statewide votes proposing state constitution changes. Other measures hike the number of signatures on petitions and they must meet these thresholds in all eight districts.

"The multitude of different proposals to strip voter power is a political game to confuse the opposition; it attempts to fracture a united opposition," said LWV's Dunlap. "Those who are restricting the IP will not be successful. There are many organizations and people who are acting together to maintain the strength of our democracy.

"The philosophy of those in power is too often to hold onto power as tightly as they can, even if that power is contrary to democracy," added Dunlap. "A simple majority of voters is a threat to expose the narrow interests of a loud minority – a minority that encourages legislators to ignore most voters."

Some old-line Republicans in the state are cautioning the current MAGA Republicans in the state legislature that they may be overreaching in their efforts to disassemble the initiative process. Their rhetoric and bill proposals on IP could backfire.

"Attacks on the ballot initiative petition process in Missouri are not new – and usually arise after an issue passes that the party in power does not like," said Carl Bearden, CEO of United for Missouri.

"This happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s under Democratic majorities, and it is happening once again under Republican majorities. Neither party was, or is, correct," said Bearden, a St. Charles Republican and former speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives.

Tom Coleman, a past GOP member of the Missouri House and former U.S. Representative Congressman joined Russ Carnahan, a past Democratic member of the Missouri House and U.S. congressman, in issuing this joint statement:

"This isn't about reform, or Democrats versus Republicans. Instead, it's a transparent power grab by special interests and some politicians trying to fundamentally alter the rules -- and limit our freedom to vote directly on the issues that impact everyday Missourians."

The case for building better business journalism

By Betsy Edgerton

Business journalism, if done well, is community journalism.

The beats converge in stories about burgeoning small businesses, from a new grocery store that serves an underserved Hispanic community, to the giddy launch of a trading-card store. Business journalism seeks to answer the “why” behind the persistence of sexual harassment at restaurants. And it explores quirky topics, like the surprising connection between K-Pop fans and coffee-cup sleeves.

Students from my Business Journalism class at Columbia College Chicago wrote those articles—but nary a story about the stock market, Fortune 500 companies or the best way to manage a 401K. When I told my students in the first class meeting that reporting about money is reporting about social equity, I got their full attention. And they responded to my challenge, writing about local businesses and workplace issues in news-deserted Chicago neighborhoods and suburbs, doing interviews in Spanish and writing in English, making the rounds of stores and restaurants in their neighborhoods. They found business angles on topics they vibe with: sports, fashion, music.

The dean of the business beat

When I set out to revamp my department’s long-running business reporting class last year, I kept veteran business reporter Chris Roush’s “The Future of Business Journalism: Why It Matters for Wall Street and Main Street” on my desk. I quoted him to my students, highlighting his contention that if diverse groups don’t see themselves reflected in business reporting, they won’t read it.

“The news media spends way too much time in coverage of the stock market, even though 90 percent of all stock are owned by the top 10 percent of the U.S. population,” Roush told Zip06, a local news website in Connecticut.

“If I’m a Fortune 500 company or a big company like Facebook or Amazon, the business media covers me every single day and everything you ever wanted to know about those companies, but that’s not what most people and most business owners need in terms of their business news and information,” says Roush, who’s also the dean of the School of Communications at Quinnipiac University.

That information vacuum cropped up in a story one of my students pitched. She spoke with several Spanish-speaking business owners who clearly could benefit

from some mentorship from a small business development center. Those services are available, but what news outlet is writing about them—in Spanish?

If business newsrooms continue to be majority white, Roush writes in his book, if the high cost of access to smart business journalism is out of reach and the easy option for financial advice comes from sponsored content from a financial services company, then audiences will miss out on useful and inspiring reporting.

He points to growing efforts in business journalism to do better by people of color and women (through fellowships with historically Black college and universities, for instance), but “more work needs to be done, especially in making newsrooms more diverse.”

A need for financial literacy

In my class, my students learned how the stock market works, how social responsibility is connected to nonprofit status, and what lies ahead for Social Security. They consulted sections of the AP Stylebook they’d skipped over before to learn business terminology.

However, when it came to more tangible topics, ranging from credit cards to credit ratings, they were wobbly. Turns out, my college’s middle class and first-to-college students needed financial basics. They’re not alone.

Financial illiteracy in America is widespread, and people of color and women have less financial knowledge than others, according to the Financial Educators Council. When the group tested Americans about basic financial literacy, about 70% of adults passed the test, with about 60% of teenagers passing. That’s a lot of people who could use some help deciphering compound interest.

So where do young adults turn to learn about entrepreneurship, how to negotiate a lease, or what business trends could affect the products and services they love, such as smartphones or streaming services? Free, quality options are scarce.

In my class, they wrote those business stories themselves, homing in on the people and topics they care about. My hope is that after all my cheerleading—and reminders that business journalists tend to earn more than other journalists—they’ll see the value of follow-the-money storytelling.

Where the stories are

The numbers that illustrate the financial impact of minority- and woman-owned businesses should be front and center for any business journalist looking for story ideas. Here are some highlights of the Census Bureau’s analysis of 2020 Census Bureau data, released last year (all numbers are estimates of 2020 data):

- Women-owned businesses had \$1.9 trillion in sales of goods and services in 2020, the largest number in this group. Veteran-owned businesses were next, with \$930 billion in sales.
- Among minority-race groups, Asian-owned businesses had the highest sales (\$841.1 billion).
- Hispanic-owned businesses grew about 8% from 346,836 in 2019 to 375,256 in 2020.
- A quarter of the 140,918 Black- or African American-owned businesses are in the healthcare and social assistance sectors.
- And businesses owned by American Indian and Alaska Native (40,392 businesses and 243,523 employees) and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (8,822 businesses and 60,000 employees) made up the smallest groups.

As a dedicated fan of business journalism, I’m primed to read an article or listen to a podcast with a narrative arc and a dollars-and-cents focus that tells the story of, say, a trail-blazing startup in Oahu.

Dollars-and-cents and DEI

Business journalism excels at exploring labor both critically and compassionately. It prepares people for what’s on the financial horizon for the things deeply affected by social inequity: jobs, healthcare, education, housing and families.

My hope is that media outlets reconsider reporting on business as a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in their communities. The upper-middle class and the 1% aren’t the only people who need solid information about business to live well. Journalists can find relatable and informative—and perhaps inspiring—stories about local, independent businesses that appeal to underserved readers.

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