

Executive Summary

Media Literacy Lecture Series
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Introduction: The public education series, sponsored by the Livermore Public Library, is divided into three lectures delivered in August of 2023 at the Library. It includes supplemental materials, including footnotes, toolkits, resource lists, a glossary, and post-event media.

Media Lecture 1 is titled History and Context of U.S. Mass Communications. The lecture explores the development of media and communications technology in the United States, examining challenges and transformations over time.

The presentation's thesis focuses on understanding how American media history has demonstrated cyclical characteristics and set the stage for the current threats of misinformation, disinformation, degradation of discourse, and distrust in institutions. Today's challenges have fundamental similarities to and differences from those of the past.

The lecture covers several eras in American media history, described here as the Press and Partisanship era, The Penny Press era, the Yellow Journalism era, The Professional Era, and the Rise of New Media. It also documents the decline of trust in media, driven by scandals, new technologies, and shifting economic models. It discusses the fragmentation of media, the rise of social media, and the challenges faced by traditional news organizations.

During this colorful jaunt through our nation's media history, we highlight anecdotes and lessons learned from such characters as Edward R. Murrow, William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, Thomas Jefferson, the New York Times Co. v. Sullivan case, and Watergate.

The conclusion emphasizes the enduring importance of journalism, its role in democracy, and its ability to adapt and endure challenges.

Media Lecture 2, The Brave New World of Information, delves into the current state of society, marked by declining trust in institutions, polarization, and information weaponization.

The presentation begins by discussing the four key ingredients for a functioning democracy: trust in institutions, public education, a shared sense of empirical reality, and the free flow of information. It acknowledges that democracy is under assault globally, with technology playing a significant role, although human agency can also wield technology for noble purposes.

The presentation emphasizes the changing landscape and the dominance of social media platforms over traditional outlets. It explores the democratization of digital technology and the unprecedented power of social media companies to influence public discourse. The erosion of

trust in traditional media and the rise of sensationalistic and opinion-driven content contribute to the challenge of discerning reliable information.

The discussion on audience consumption habits reveals the dominance of smartphones and social media as primary sources of news for most Americans, particularly among younger generations. However, trust in these sources is often low, fueling an age of cynicism.

Also, the presentation explores the factors that make society susceptible to disinformation, including cognitive biases, the proliferation and virality of extremist content, the erosion of trust in institutions, the blurring of opinion and news, and the formation of filter bubbles. These factors, combined with the power of false memories and fear-driven cancel culture, pose significant threats to democracy.

The presentation warns of the historical inflection point at which democracy finds itself.

Media Lecture 3 is titled Restoring Truth and Democracy. This presentation highlights the challenges faced by our modern age of information, where the proliferation of digital publishing technologies and the democratization of information have resulted in an inscrutable and polarized information ecosystem. Thrust to the forefront is the need for interventions to safeguard democracy. Three key areas are identified: education, institutions, and innovation.

The importance of digital news literacy is highlighted, to enable people to navigate the complex landscape of information. Approaches include media literacy courses in school curriculums, and education programs for all in community spaces to foster values in impartial truth and inquiry.

We must also bolster our free and democratic society. supporting institutions and cultural values such as science, the free press, educational establishments, libraries, and government.

Libraries are highlighted as vital community institutions that can adapt to the evolving challenges and become centers of trust, fairness, and knowledge.

Legislation/Technology/Policy sections also touch on the need for government regulation and the establishment of a federal agency to establish data sharing protocols by social media companies for effective regulation. The lecture also highlights the importance of self-correction, authenticating information sources, and innovations in technology to reward higher quality information and demote disinformation. Tech innovation has historically been a double-edged sword, cutting both in ways that disrupt and destabilize but also empower.

The conclusion stresses the monumental battle ahead to reconcile tensions between free speech, evolving technology, and the quality of discourse necessary for democracy. It also provides actionable steps on personal, social, and societal levels to restore respect for empirical truth and strengthen democratic values in the face of disinformation and polarization.