

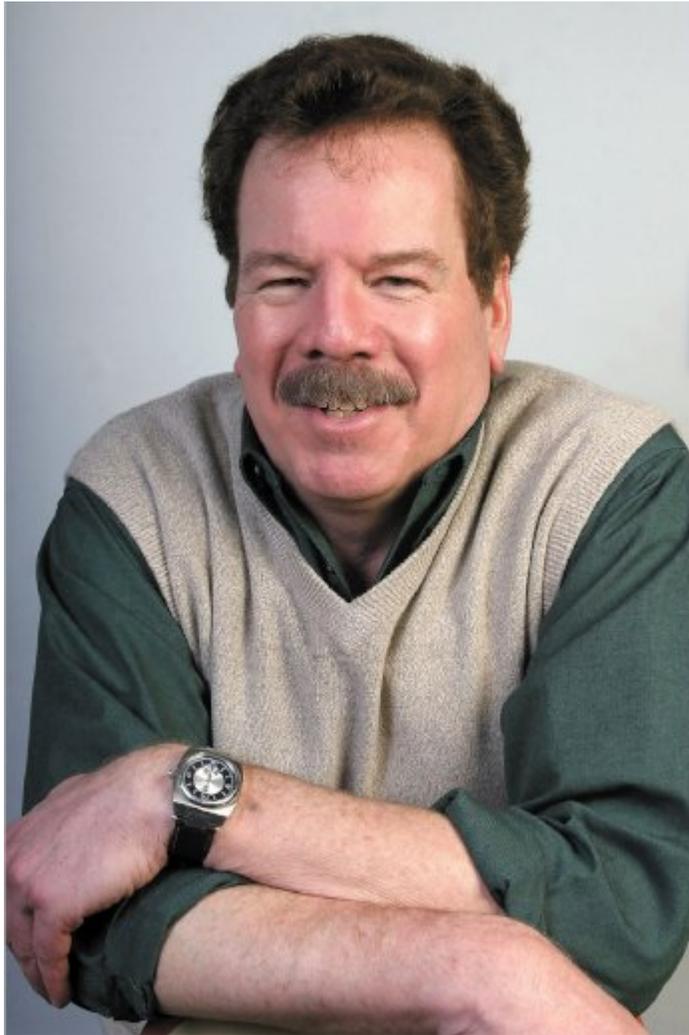
insights

TYPES NOT MAPPED YET January 11, 2019 | TTR not mapped yet | Mark Sableman

Media literacy in a time of misinformation: A Q&A with Don Corrigan

“Misinformation” was named the [word of the year](#) for 2018, and it’s clear we’ve entered a media world where separating truth from falsity can be difficult. [Several studies](#) have suggested that people today need more training in “media literacy,” so they can spot and avoid misinformation.

I asked an expert in media literacy, my friend Don Corrigan, professor of journalism at Webster University, to tell us how he trains students in media literacy, and how ordinary news consumers can fight misinformation.



Don Corrigan

SABLEMAN: Don, what is media literacy?

CORRIGAN: First of all, media literacy is all about knowing that “medium” is singular and “media” are plural. I feel a sense of accomplishment when my students grasp this half way into the semester. Seriously, a workable definition is that it involves gaining the analytical tools to access, to critically evaluate, to use, and even to create media. My colleague, Professor Art Silverblatt, is fond of emphasizing that media literacy is not about criticizing or hating the media, whether it be news or entertainment media. In fact, it should lead to more enjoyment and understanding of media.

SABLEMAN: What’s special about media literacy? Are there special tools or techniques, or does it simply mean looking critically at everything you see and read?

CORRIGAN: We academics have a lot of different guidelines and techniques for media literacy, but I often explain it with a simple formula that I cribbed from John McManus, author of [Detecting Bull: How To Identify Biased, Fake and Junk Journalism In the Digital Age](#). McManus developed what he called the SMELL test:

S stands for Source - Find out who is providing the information.

M stands for Motivation - Why are they telling me this stuff?

E is for Evidence - Do they have real evidence for their assertions?

L is for Logic - Do the facts logically compel the conclusions?

L is for Left out - What’s missing in the information that might change the interpretation of subject matter?

This is a good simple test that people can easily recall and apply. My students can remember this acronym and it provides a good template, especially for analyzing news products.

SABLEMAN: I especially like the last point concerning what is left out, since so much misinformation seems to be due to a lack of context, and the misleading effect of even a few truthful facts taken and presented out of context. But how does the ordinary reader or viewer know when something has been left out?

CORRIGAN: There is no ready formula for understanding this aspect of misinformation, it really just involves comparative study of content. It was once very easy to do in two-newspaper towns like St. Louis, where you could examine and compare the content of the conservative Globe-Democrat and the liberal Post-Dispatch. Each paper sometimes left out or downplayed certain content that did not fit so well with its own political template or perspective.

Of course, it may be even easier now to see what this involves in a comparison of FOX News' content with the content of MSNBC on cable channels. In recent days, FOX News may give inordinate time to news of a police officer killed by an undocumented immigrant, but totally avoid the latest revelations from the Mueller Investigation. The situation for news content may be totally reversed on MSNBC. Content on MSNBC may focus almost entirely on indictments of Trump campaign officials by Special Prosecutor Mueller and give little attention to the crime of an undocumented immigrant. What accounts for this difference in emphasis? Of course, we also have to examine whether we are watching a report of nightly news, or an hour of punditry on each cable channel. In either case, we can see what is being left out and we can use the tools of media literacy to help us understand why some things are being left out or are being downplayed on the respective channels.

SABLEMAN: Do you have any special rules for media literacy in social media? So much misinformation comes from social media.

CORRIGAN: There are entire books now that bring the tools of media literacy to the task of determining what sites and messages are credible - and incredible - on social media. As a nation, we only began to understand the extent of the damaging disinformation on the web with the 2016 election. We came to realize that large segments of the American populace were regularly following sites with absolutely no credibility. Think of Alex Jones' Infowars. We also learned that other countries were interfering with our election process by sending out destructive political memes. These phony memes were then passed on to vast networks of friends and acquaintances.

Given the consequences of disinformation campaigns on the internet that can legitimately be described as "weapons of cyber warfare," it can be argued that Americans have a moral obligation to become media literate. They need to recognize the import of the information they are consuming and then passing on to other Americans. They need to take responsibility for sending out what may, in fact, be half-truths or total falsehoods that are a danger to national security. This recognition of moral responsibility is in itself a prime lesson of media literacy.

Circling back to the original question on how to determine what is credible on social media, it can be a simple process of returning to the McManus SMELL test. Start with the "S" - what is the source of the information you are digesting? Who is responsible for the story or photos that you are about to forward to your friends? For those of us who grew up in the Watergate Era, finding the source means to "follow the money." Who is financing the website or the individuals who appear on a website? What is their motivation and mission? What country may be providing the financial wherewithal for meme creation and political messaging? What is their motivation and mission? This information is not always that hard to find and to verify.

I do think intelligent media consumers are beginning to look for a (media) consumer protection agency to help them understand what is being distributed via the web. They want the FCC and Congress to get involved. Thus, we've seen the recent Congressional hearings with executives of powerful social media platforms testifying before U.S. legislators about what is happening on their media outlets.

SABLEMAN: My journalism school classmate Stan Crock, in a [very interesting piece](#), suggested news organizations change the way they report news to help combat misinformation. Do you agree?

CORRIGAN: Stan Crock's piece is a must-read for anyone who has a sincere interest in combatting misinformation and in encouraging news organizations to devote the resources - and to provide the space - to correct misinformation. Journalists and their news organizations should consider Crock's four prescriptions for what the news media should do in the way of correctives to address our misinformation environment. I would single out, in particular, his prescription that it is past time for journalists to "Stop Chasing the Shiny Ball." Crock uses as an example the enormous amount of news time spent on chasing and deciphering the enormous number of tweets by President Donald Trump.

In fact, more news time should be spent on explaining to Americans what tweets are and what they are not. Tweets are not journalism; they are not at all appropriate for disseminating administration policy directives, such as announcing a troop pullout from Syria; they are not an appropriate vehicle for firing cabinet members or other officials in high office. Tweets clearly are a method to bypass the press; to distract the press and the people; and to further disinformation with the constant repetition of "useful idiocies" and falsehoods.

SABLEMAN: I first learned about media literacy more than 20 years ago from your retired colleague, Art Silverblatt, who wrote a [leading text](#) on the subject. But I didn't recognize the need for media literacy training until recently, and I suspect others have been slow as well to embrace it. Are universities doing better in training students for media literacy? And how are we reaching adults who never got that training in college?

CORRIGAN: Art Silverblatt is a pioneer in the field of media literacy, so the question of how well universities are doing in teaching media literacy should probably be directed to him. But I will offer this. Our current crisis of disinformation and fake news have inspired a slew of media literacy courses that have been cobbled together to

meet student demand. Also, some academics take the view that media literacy is all about what has been described as “balancing” in the world of journalism. If you take in one point of view on a given subject, then you are compelled to take in the opposing view - and that makes you media literate.

This is not the case. For example, anyone with a basic understanding of science knows the folly of this kind of thinking, especially when it comes to the issue of global warming. There are not two sides to the global warming controversy. Global warming is a scientific fact. There would be no global warming controversy without the “false balancing” that has hindered Americans’ understanding of the factors behind the growing climate crisis.

SABLEMAN: Modern neuroscience research, by [Daniel Kahneman](#) and others, shows how easy it can be to mislead people. People respond to danger with automatic reflexes, so they are easily manipulated by the danger calls of sensationalized news reports. People believe false claims when they are repeated often enough. And everyone is susceptible to “confirmation bias” - looking favorably on things that confirm your own existing beliefs. How can we overcome the brain functions that enable misinformation? In particular, how can we combat confirmation bias? After all, even a well-meaning person applying the SMELL test is likely to validate a report that’s consistent with his or her own pre-existing beliefs.

CORRIGAN: Daniel Kahneman is offering a perspective and template that explains human reaction to information via neuroscience. It’s interesting stuff, but there is much more to be explored and some of his concepts seem to me to be in an infancy stage. They need more scrutiny and testing for validation. He does raise interesting questions. Are humans hard-wired to be in one camp or another on basic attitudes and basic responses to life’s challenges? Is there a confirmation-bias, a propensity to accept only things that confirm your own existing beliefs? And is this hard-wired into human brains? Wow! This certainly presents challenges for the news media, particularly at a time when the press has fewer resources to do news, much less understand the neuroscience that determines readers’ reactions to news. This is where media literacy scholars in academia are going to have to do the study and pick up the slack.

I don’t think it requires study of neuroscience to remark on the role fear plays in getting audiences to pay attention to news and to react in certain ways to news. Yes, of course, people respond to danger with automatic reflexes, so they are easily manipulated by the “danger calls” of sensationalized news reports. It’s startling that some news outlets actually accentuate these “danger calls” with gongs and with graphics declaring “News Alert” or “Special Bulletin.” Obviously, these devices are being used to galvanize audiences because they work.

In this regard, basic neuroscience can help a consumer of news understand what might be going on in his head when presented with information - and how someone might be trying to do a bit of manipulation. Neuroscientists tell us about our triune brain and how the lower reptilian complex reacts to threats and fear, while our higher neomammalian brain complex consists of the cerebral neo-cortex where rational thought and reason happen. News consumers should resist letting sensational news activate their reptilian brain, and they should consciously use their more evolved neo-cortex to process information. Except in the most dire of situations, I do think we can consciously choose to use our more evolved neo-cortex brain resources to process information and to overcome the reptilian responses of anxiety, aggression, “fight or flight,” and over-reaction.

On a side note, before I became fully aware of this basic neuroscience, I was the adviser to the student newspaper at Webster University. The student journalists were upset that few people seemed to be reading their newspaper. I told them that was because their stories were dull and that they needed to do “reptilian journalism.” I said they needed to do stories about issues people were really concerned about. It worked.

After I won a national newspaper adviser of the year award, I was interviewed by a few trade magazines, and I mentioned that I told my students about practicing “reptilian journalism.” That term was picked up by these magazines without any explanation of what I might be talking about. It even made it into a St. Louis magazine piece without explanation. Fine with me – a trade secret. But certainly in these times, sophisticated news consumers should know when information is tailored for their reptilian brain and when it is meant for more rational processing. Another media literacy issue that calls out for more exploration.

SABLEMAN: Let’s close on a lighter note. You have seen a lot as an editor and a professor. What’s your favorite story about people believing misinformation?

CORRIGAN: Okay, I can go out on a lighter note. I have been extremely fortunate to be a journalism professor and a community newspaper editor at the same time for more than 40 years. There is no substitute for real world journalism experience as a foundation to teaching journalism - and to have both the experience and the teaching going on contemporaneously is a real advantage. In one of the early years as editor of the Webster-Kirkwood Times, we ran a press release on the front page of the paper about Kirkwood’s annual Greentree Festival Parade. The press release spoofed that President Ronald Reagan might be appearing in the parade. (It was actually a parade participant who would be wearing a Reagan mask.) From that short paragraph about Reagan, I learned about the gullibility of readers and the responsibility of editors.

We received phone calls from some anti-Reagan activists who wanted to know about the parade route and where they could protest the president’s appearance. We also received phone calls from the president’s fans regarding what Reagan would be doing after the parade in Kirkwood. Was there a place to meet with him, get some autographs? A little media literacy on the part of these readers might have precluded their phone calls. If none of the TV stations and other newspapers in St. Louis were covering the impending Reagan visit to Kirkwood, why would a reader assume a fledgling community newspaper was the sole media outlet with the real scoop on a visit by Reagan?



Now consider this: If all the major national newspapers and all the national television networks are providing one version of reality - and just one relatively small, politically-oriented cable station is providing a disparate version of reality - would you put your trust in that cable station?

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