

# Dear Reader

Real news. Fake news. Alternative facts. Post-truths. How do we know what is real or made up? How do we identify reliable and credible news? We are living in the Digital Age of Disinformation when it has become harder and harder to know who and what to believe. How we choose to get our news has never mattered more.

I am a media literacy educator and advocate. I have been teaching for more than three decades and have taught thousands of students, and facilitated workshops for just as many educators, parents, health practitioners, and media professionals. Whether I am teaching about media and diversity or gender or popular culture, my students learn media literacy skills. In my teacher in-service trainings, parent education and professional workshops, media literacy is emphasized as a life skill. I teach how to analyze media messages with a critical eye by asking questions about who created the message and why, the techniques used to construct the message and deconstruct its meaning, and how different people might interpret the message.

Then came the 2016 presidential election. That year the word *post-truth* was chosen by *Oxford English Dictionary* as the word-of-the-year because it spiked in frequency in mainstream media and became associated with the phrase *post-truth politics*. The term “*fake news*” was also popularized and added to the dictionary.

Just when we were steeling ourselves for the 2020 presidential election year, we were hit with Covid-19. By April, news was overwhelmed with misinformation and disinformation about the global pandemic and *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographers who track and analyze word usage began to release updates of new word entries: *Covid-19*, *coronavirus*, *infodemic*, *self-isolate*, *self-quarantine*, *shelter in place*, *social distancing*, *superspreader*, *flatten the curve*, *PPE*, *staycation* and more. By June, the Black Lives Matter movement was back in the national headlines after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black Americans by police officers that led to protests against law enforcement agencies and a surge of social activism in the United States and around the world. *Black Lives Matter* and its abbreviation *BLM* exploded in usage and were added to the new word list.

With so many events happening worldwide in 2020, *Oxford English Dictionary* decided for the first time in its history that one word could not capture the year and instead chose a list of words that most frequently appeared in text and web-based news, blogs, and other sources. The words were selected from different categories that included Covid-related vocabulary, social movements and social media, new technologies for working and living remotely, the environment, politics, and economics. Among the new word entries in *Oxford Languages 2020: Words of an Unprecedented Year* is one entry that is particularly noteworthy: *media literacy*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (March 2021) defines media literacy as “proficiency in the evaluation, analysis, and understanding of mass media; *esp.* the ability to analyse critically any story or event presented in the media and to determine its accuracy or credibility.”

Although the media literacy movement has been around for decades, the use of the term was relatively rare outside of educational circles. It took “fake news” to bring media literacy out of the academic shadow and into the mainstream. Usage of the term media literacy will undoubtedly become more widespread as misinformation and disinformation continue to gain momentum in the media ecosystem increasing the need for skills to separate fact from fiction. There are plenty of indications that conspiracy theorists, hate groups, certain news personalities and news outlets, social media users, even some elected officials, are attempting to create an alternative reality. Consider the false narrative that emerged following the 2020 election claiming that Trump was robbed of his second term as president through election fraud.

The “Big Lie,” as it is called, stands out for its gross intentional misrepresentation of the facts and polarizing effect on the country. This manipulation of the election facts to delegitimize the new Administration incited the January

6<sup>th</sup> insurrection on the U.S. Capitol in which thousands stormed the building during a violent mob attack against the U.S. Congress. The attack terrorized members of Congress, their staffs, and the press, and resulted in multiple deaths, physical harm to over 140 law enforcement officials, and a heightened threat environment across the country. Two days later Twitter permanently suspended Trump's account "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter, 2021). Still, as hundreds of rioters were arrested for their role in the insurrection and charged with assaulting police officers, illegal entry into government buildings and desecrating government property, some news pundits, elected officials, including former President Trump, attempted to rebrand the deadly insurrection as a "love fest" or characterize it as "a normal tourist visit." The Republican National Committee Chair attempted to justify the deadly riot as "legitimate public discourse." While this blatant mischaracterization was refuted by Senate Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell who called it a "violent insurrection," others in the party did not side with him.

More than a year later, the ideologically motivated "Big Lie" continues to be promoted by Trump, many Republican politicians and their supporters, as well as conservative TV news personalities and talk show hosts, and Trump's Twitter account has been reinstated by new ownership. Polls show a majority of Republicans falsely believe there was election fraud and are not swayed by incriminating evidence presented by the House Select Committee investigation or the rare charge of seditious conspiracy brought by the Justice Department against several insurrectionists for their role in the attack. The lie also has had a ripple effect on future elections. "Big Lie" believers are putting the future of fair elections in jeopardy by doxxing, harassing and threatening election workers for doing their job, and candidates who promote the lie are running for office where they would exert influence over the way ballots are cast, counted and certified.

Clearly, teaching media literacy concepts is not enough to understand what is happening with news messaging, especially during times of crisis when new information is rapidly developing. What is missing is knowledge about journalism practices and standards and skills to assess the news source, check the facts, and empower civic responsibility and engagement. With my background in journalism and media literacy, I developed a News Literacy course for the journalism program where I teach that connects media literacy and news literacy concepts with civic engagement.

This book is about the essential news media literacy skills every person should know to help navigate the complex news media ecosystem. I truly hope

that this approach helps you become a more news literate person... and that you pass it along!

Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D.

## References

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