

# The Dangers of Low Literacy for American Democracy: The Promising Role of Public Institutions as Community Conveners

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For nearly a decade, concerns about misinformation influencing U.S. elections have grown. As modern elections are increasingly characterized by overwhelming amounts of information, trust in the media is at an all-time low, with people across the political spectrum reporting low confidence in the mass media's ability to report the news "fully, accurately, and fairly" (Brenan, 2024, para. 8). Voters with high literacy can struggle to make sense of information online, and those with lower literacy may face even greater challenges. To prepare people to discern credible political information and make informed choices, we must find more opportunities to incorporate digital media literacy into basic adult literacy training.

For over 40 years, adults over 45 have voted at the highest rates, especially in smaller, off-cycle local races, with significant influence (Bunis, 2018; Fabina, 2021). At the same time, older adults are more likely to share misinformation on social media and often have difficulty determining the origins and reliability of political information (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). In contrast, younger voters, who adopted digital technologies earlier, trust platforms like TikTok and YouTube more than traditional outlets (Liedke, 2022). Younger voters are more likely to have formal digital literacy training, defined as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills" (Welcome to ALA's Literacy Clearinghouse, n.d., n.p.), while older adults are mostly self-taught and consume more partisan media (Muise et al., 2022). This generational gap in media literacy can lead to varying interpretations of events, influenced by factors like political affiliation and education (Baptista & Gradim, 2022).

Navigating the voting process can also be challenging for adults with lower literacy levels. In 2022, Parker (2024) found that most ballot propositions were written above a high school reading level, while over half of U.S. adults have a literacy rate below the 6th-grade level (The National Literacy Institute, 2023). Digital platforms focusing on visual content, like TikTok and YouTube, are often more accessible sources of political information. And though news organizations, government agencies, and political candidates usually have a presence on these platforms, the personalities with the greatest engagement — and potentially the most influence — often do not have the expertise to warrant credibility. These factors can make navigating the civic duty of voting difficult, frustrating, and potentially dangerous.

## Navigating the Digital Landscape

Research shows that people of all ages have trouble discerning the veracity of information online (Brashier & Schacter, 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; McGrew et al., 2017) and that older adults are more likely to share information on social media without fact-checking it (Guess et al., 2019). Given the widespread concern about political misinformation, researchers and educators have tested and implemented a variety of media literacy interventions to help people use digital media with more confidence and skill. First among them is *pre-bunking* or implementing an intervention to correct misinformation before people encounter it. Pre-bunking works to build people's resilience to misinformation by seeding small amounts of information before a misleading narrative takes hold among a larger population, such as pre-emptively explaining how ballots

are counted and why the process takes longer in some states before election day misinformation can spread (Roozenbeck & van der Linden, 2019). Pre-bunking can also take the form of sharing media literacy-related messages that prime people to apply critical thinking skills to content they see on social media (Hameleers, 2024).

Several studies have found pre-bunking effectively lessens misinformation's effects in experimental settings (Hameleers, 2024). For instance, researchers found that pre-bunking successfully countered COVID-19 vaccine misinformation among Canadians over the age of 50 (Vivion et al., 2022). One potential drawback is that the healthy skepticism honed through pre-bunking messages may lead to a deeper skepticism of credible information (Hameleers, 2024). Still, pre-bunking, spearheaded by technology companies like Google (Prebunking with Google), as well as by fact-checkers, educators, and other credible information providers, can be an effective and inclusive tactic for adult basic education and language learners.

Wineburg and McGrew (2019) examined what made different types of professional information consumers successful and found that fact-checkers used a technique called *lateral reading* to discern the credibility of online sources. With lateral reading, users read across the web by opening new browser tabs to find other evidence and perspectives when faced with an unknown website or source. Research has found that with direct instruction, lateral reading can be effective in helping users determine source credibility (Wineburg et al., 2022). Much of the research has been done with young people in school settings, though Fendt et al. found that among older participants “lateral reading may have increased participants’ knowledge of news authors’ identity, thus stimulating analytic processing, and enabled the participants to evaluate the information in a more differentiated manner” (2023, p. 8). The authors also found lateral reading training to be effective in both written and human training models, which further increases its utility for adult learners with different literacy levels.

Online games that offer media users an opportunity to practice media literacy techniques have been found to be effective alternatives to direct formal instruction. Glas et al. (2023) conducted a landscape analysis of media literacy-related games and found that 100 had been created between 2008 and 2023, with 20% of the

sample explicitly related to combatting misinformation. For example, the *Bad News Game* teaches players how misinformation can spread by having them role-play as the misinformation peddler (Basol et al., 2020). Researchers in Korea found that their media literacy game *Facts, Please* was more effective in teaching online reasoning skills than a lecture-only and control group (Yang et al., 2024).

Integrating digital media literacy tactics into existing adult basic and English-language instruction helps to contextualize the skills by connecting daily activities to literacy instruction in a way that encourages participation (Yuan et al., 2019).

## Opportunities for Adult Digital Media Literacy and Civic Engagement

The tactics discussed here align with much of what is being proposed for U.S. K12 schools in digital media literacy education. However, little policy traction and investment have been made in addressing media literacy shortcomings in adults. Greenberg (2008) describes the myriad challenges facing broader adult literacy programs and the context in which literacy can be taught, including technology skills. Public spaces like libraries have played a prominent role in filling a gap for adult digital media literacy training (Barrie et al., 2021), yet funding for resources and ongoing programming to keep up with trends and accelerating AI capabilities is limited.

Universities and other public service organizations are also instrumental in building digital media literacy for adults. Daniels et al. (2021) argue that higher education institutions have a moral duty to not only foster and guide knowledge but also provide resources and programming accessible to the broader community to construct guardrails and checks on power. The following are examples of successful informal learning programs at Arizona State University (ASU) that serve the broader public in navigating the current information era. These programs intend to convene communities to simultaneously boost digital media literacy and build resilience to political misinformation.

### ASU News Co/Lab Mediactive

Ahead of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the News Co/

Lab at ASU's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication launched a free massive open online course (MOOC) and companion website called Mediactive. The course helps voters navigate the complex media environment to make informed choices. More than 3,500 people enrolled in the course, most of whom were older adults. Though the full course requires a certain level of technical and literacy skills, there are other ways to engage with the content. The website is an accessible introduction to digital media literacy skills. A Mediactive Facebook group brings together a community of interested learners, and course videos are available on the News Co/Lab's YouTube page. The course is also available in Spanish.

## Collaboration with Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI, n.d.) is a network of 125 U.S. and college programs that support ongoing learning. The News Co/Lab collaborated with the ASU OLLI to bring the Mediactive training to its members. Putting tools in the hands of these lifelong learners empowered them to, in turn, be media literacy advocates in their own social circles. Media literacy instruction has been available online and in person at various public locations throughout the state. Instructors have also been invited to present online for OLLI groups outside Arizona.

The collaboration with OLLI also included intergenerational learning with ASU students. Older adults can feel self-conscious or discriminated against because of their low levels of digital media literacy (Barrie et al., 2021); intergenerational learning allows them to learn from digitally savvy young adults in a way that highlights mutual knowledge exchange. Likewise, the young trainers feel empowered as experts in the subject matter but recognize they have much to learn from the older participants (Pstross et al., 2017).

## Arizona Town Hall

Arizona Town Hall has a long legacy of providing a deliberative forum to educate, engage, and empower communities to ideate solutions to complicated social issues. Arizona Town Hall works in close partnership with universities like Arizona State University, experts, and other organizations to create background reports

to ensure participants are equipped with fact-based information to spark conversation and strive for consensus on policy recommendations and self-derived community solutions.

Town Hall participants range in demographic, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The in-person format is conducive for adults with low literacy levels, as the time is spent discussing a specific community issue in conjunction with the background report and one's lived experiences. Importantly, highlights of the background report are often synthesized and presented orally to participants via an expert panel or in smaller groups with a neutral facilitator. The rest of the Town Hall process entails participants discussing carefully crafted questions meant to evoke diverse, multi-partisan responses, followed by all participants contributing recommendations to address the community issue. Final reports are available online and shared with elected leaders, public libraries, and community organizations committed to advocating for change. Importantly, the Town Hall experience builds relationships, focuses on solutions, and combats misinformation through dialogue.

## Conclusion

Universities and other community institutions have an important role in helping people navigate the onslaught of political information during election cycles and beyond. Learning experiences that foster critical thinking, dialogue, and fact-checking skills can better equip voters, specifically older adults and adults with lower levels of literacy, with the knowledge and skills to more objectively weigh information and positions on hot-button issues. By thinking beyond traditional for-credit classes, higher education institutions can provide a critical public service to community members without access to digital media literacy education. Doing so not only helps better prepare people of all ages to manage today's overwhelming information environment but also better positions higher education as an accessible lifelong journey. Acting as a community convener can help education institutions build trust – particularly among adults who have not participated in post-secondary education – while increasing opportunities for people to bridge divides in our highly partisan society.

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