DIGITAL NEWS LITERACY AND PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

A Guide to Navigating Truth and the Information Landscape in the Digital Age

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Introduction

News broke in August 2021 that the Taliban, an Islamic conservative political and religious group, was attempting to conquer Kabul. My friend, who was in the United States at the time, quickly learned about the event, yet she was eager to go beyond what traditional media were reporting and learn from those who lived in the capital of this Asian country what was happening there. Intrigued by the news and about what Afghanistan had to offer romantically, she set her location on a dating app to Kabul and started communicating with her matches. Instead of a light conversation, she received a striking message on August 15 from a man who matched with her. In what should have been a casual exchange, he informed my friend that heavily armed Taliban fundamentalists had already stormed Kabul, causing chaos in the city. When my friend received that disturbing text, mainstream media outlets in the West were still reporting that the Taliban were outside Kabul and that locals could not tell how long the city would hold. According to her, for three more hours after she learned what was happening, news media still claimed the same. It was later that day, when she watched reports carried out by Cable News Network (CNN), Associated Press, and other prominent media organizations, that it was confirmed what she had already known—the Taliban leadership had indeed taken control of the presidential palace in Kabul, prompting both Afghans and internationals to flee the country. One of the reasons for the delay in reporting on the said events was that many journalists had already fled to Qatar, leaving ordinary citizens, along with other media representatives who were still in Kabul, to share with the rest of the world reports on the events in the city.

My friend's story, although engaging and genuine, might be labeled as just slightly unusual in the digital age we live in. When something happens, we do not necessarily turn to legacy media, such as television or radio, to learn more. The age of digital technologies has enabled us, news consumers, to obtain information about events happening across the globe in real time and from a

vast array of sources. Many citizens report news from all over the globe, taking a role in the practice that journalism scholars have labeled as "participatory journalism." In addition to that, more and more Americans acquire news through digital devices and social media. According to a 2024 Pew Research Center survey, 58 percent of the citizens in the United States stated that they preferred consuming news through digital devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers ("News Platform Fact Sheet," 2024). Social media and other online platforms play a particularly important role in news consumption. At least 25 percent of people claim that they often get news on social media, while 29 percent get it sometimes ("Social Media and News Fact Sheet," 2024). These statistics, combined with the increased reliance on digital technologies, highlight the shift in how people access news.

Bearing in mind this transformation in news consumption, it did not come as a surprise that it was not a broadcast channel or a newspaper article but a random person my friend met on Tinder who shared crucial information regarding the unanticipated events in Afghanistan, which took place only two weeks before the US troops were scheduled to withdraw from this country. Yet, the moment she accepted the information as trustworthy was later, when it was shared by trusted sources. This brings home the relevance of both informal and journalistic sources in the ever-evolving technological world we live in. News media do not necessarily break the news. An anonymous individual may learn about newsworthy events and use digital tools available to them, including websites and social media platforms, to share what they have witnessed with other internet users. They can persuade us to believe the information they disseminate by providing evidence for it in the form of videos, photographs, documents, and similar artifacts. Still, as news consumers, we may be less likely to hold them accountable for the content they spread to the extent we do when we look at the messages communicated to us by traditional news media. This accountability and our expectation to have news media deliver to us trustworthy information crafted by certain journalistic standards and norms—the information based on which we can make decisions about our lives—is what differentiates news that comes from established media sources from what is being disseminated by anonymous internet users.

This book aims to assist readers in navigating the complex digital landscape and developing critical thinking skills to assess information obtained through diverse platforms. It starts with a chapter that elaborates on journalism and its principles, as crafting and disseminating news is an integral part of this profession. Having a grasp of journalism is essential for digital news literacy, considering that it enables individuals to recognize the principles this profession adheres to, identify reputable news organizations, critically assess the credibility of information they consume, and differentiate between news and opinion. Journalism is pivotal for democracy, and a society that understands its importance is better equipped to make informed decisions and participate in civic life.

The discussion on journalism and its principles is followed by a chapter that introduces readers to a variety of news sources and provides strategies to distinguish content produced by reputable media outlets and citizen initiatives from that of partisan organizations. This is succeeded by a thorough elaboration on false and misleading content that represents a cancer to a well-informed citizenry. It includes definitions and examples that portray diverse concepts regarding questionable information, including misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news. Strategies to fight misinformation have been introduced to assist readers in distinguishing facts from fiction and promoting critical thinking. Subsequent chapters discuss opinion journalism, argument culture, and the growing importance of participatory journalism, which is illuminated in active citizens who are willing to collect and disseminate news independently or under the umbrella of mainstream media. Participatory journalism enhances digital news literacy by making individuals more informed and responsible in their engagement with news. Finally, the book examines artificial intelligence, one of the most pressing issues in modern society, by looking into both the benefits and challenges that these technologies pose in developing and strengthening digital news literacy skills.

1

Journalism in a Contemporary Media Ecosystem

Journalism is a profession that entails collecting newsworthy information, putting it into context, and disseminating it to the public. It uses diverse channels, from newspapers and magazines to broadcast and the internet, to supply society with facts and knowledge they need to navigate the complex world we live in. Journalists gather information from diverse sources, verify it, then select what they find the most relevant to craft a story and deliver it to a wider public through one or more modes of communication. The work journalists perform is vitally important for democracy to function properly, as people need verified, reliable, and trustworthy information to make decisions about their lives.

On the doorstep of the twenty-first century, journalism entered a period of tectonic changes, noticeable by the rapid adoption of new technologies across newsrooms and an increased engagement of ordinary citizens in content creation and distribution. Scholars and media practitioners started debating the future of journalism in their attempt to understand diverse factors that shape this discipline, from the digital divide to artificial intelligence. One of the focal points of their research has been analyzing the key principles of journalism that have also undergone transformation in the ever-changing news ecosystem. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, who wrote a journalism classic, "The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect," identified ten such principles, including journalists' obligation to tell the truth, to be loyal to citizens, to be independent, to verify the information before its publication, and to perform a "watchdog role" by monitoring those who are in power. Other scholars have had similar observations, suggesting that

journalism is rooted in credibility, accuracy, fairness, verification, objectivity, and autonomy (Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007; Hermida, 2015). These elements are critical for citizens to make informed decisions (Hermida, 2015; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

In the most recent edition of the book that has become fundamental to journalism students, scholars, and practitioners, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) emphasized that the long-established journalistic tenets remain relevant in the contemporary news ecosystem, but they need to be assessed from a new perspective due to immense changes that the media industry and society have gone through. One of the phenomena that is an indispensable part of this transformation is a citizen armed with a vast array of tools to gather and distribute content. For almost two decades, scholars have discussed how citizen participation in news production, eye-witnessing of events, sharing of insights with news organizations in comment sections, and distribution of information via social media are affecting journalism and its principles (e.g., Hermida, 2015; Hujanen, 2016; Karlsson, 2011; Thurman, 2008; Pantic, 2023). With changes embodied in the increased utilization of new technologies in content creation, user engagement, and pressure to detect fake news on the internet, scholars are reevaluating journalism principles in the context of the new media ecology. As an example, it has been noted that the verification procedure in journalism has shifted toward collaborative verification of the information with readers (Hermida, 2012). Furthermore, truth-telling has undergone dramatic changes as it now involves audience participation in this process (Karlsson, 2011). This development is also prompting researchers to assess ingrained journalism principles such as delivering the truth and verification of information in relation to modern tenets of the profession, such as immediacy and transparency.

Kovach and Rosenstiel, along with other scholars, supplied the literature with knowledge about modern journalism practice by explaining both theoretical concepts and journalism that is being performed in the twenty-first century. They acknowledged the active role that audiences are taking in an increasingly interactive media ecology, shaping the news more intensely than ever. What once was associated solely with the profession of journalism and its principles, such as information verification and credibility of

sources, would now be incautious to assess without looking into the media spectrum, which transcends organizations established with a primary goal to deliver news to citizens. Bearing this development in mind, this chapter will discuss the transformation of the key elements of journalism and how citizens perceive their implementation in an online media environment. This is particularly pertinent at the present time, marked not only by the greater involvement of citizens in information creation and delivery but also by the rise of misinformation and fake news and the declining public trust in the news media.

Delivering the Truth, Accuracy, and Verification of Information

Pursuing the truth has been identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) as a guiding principle and the first element of journalism. While discussing journalistic principles, these two authors indicated that the truth is the most confusing one because of diverse interpretations of this concept across disciplines. To cast light on journalistic truth, they accentuated that as a profession, journalism should be based not on the philosophical but on the practical or functional form of the truth. This functional form allows media practitioners to collect information, verify it, get the facts straight, and make sense of them by placing them in context (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 52). Other scholars embraced a corresponding approach to explain the meaning of the truth in journalism. In an essay about ten core principles that should guide international journalism education, Pavlik et al. (2020) placed "the pursuit of truth" at the top, defining it as "the alignment of a narrative with reality" (p. 394). This is similar to the perspective previously shared by Hanitzsch (2007), who explained that in journalism, delivering the truth is embodied in describing reality "as accurately and precisely as possible" (p. 376). Furthermore, Ekström and Westlund (2019) stressed that the truth claims are at the core of news stories, and they differentiate "professional journalism from other forms of public information" (p. 263).

The contemporary news environment features several digital-native tenets of journalism, such as immediacy and user participation, which affect the truth-telling process (Karlsson, 2011). The twenty-first-century technologies have created an ecosystem where news organizations are not the sole players in information dissemination, as citizens take a proactive role in this activity. The digital culture makes hierarchical relationships between journalists and news consumers vanish because journalists work in a networked media setting where they collaborate with audiences in producing and distributing news (Deuze, 2005). Media organizations utilize content provided by news consumers, thus embracing participation as part of the newsroom culture (Hujanen, 2016). However, digital tools that internet users have at their disposal simultaneously pose challenges to journalistic truth, as the accessibility of platforms for information dissemination results in building a media ecosystem that is overpopulated with various voices. This makes the truth not only somewhat confusing but also a frequently contested principle of journalism. With a mixture of diverse voices in the digital environment, it can be challenging to differentiate between facts and fiction (Martin, 2017). What also makes the truth a contested principle is that those in power tend to suppress facts that are harmful to them. This practice has further intensified in the digital era that armed internet users and people in power with social media and other platforms through which they directly communicate with a wider public (Pavlik et al., 2020).

An integral part of truth-telling is the accuracy of information and accounts of events (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Accuracy means reporting facts precisely and correctly (Brooks et al., 2002). Preciseness in reporting and avoiding even small errors is important for the truth-telling process and public trust in the news (Pavlik et al., 2020, p. 398). The truth needs to contain accurate information, while the information that is accurate needs to be truthful, but mistakes occasionally still occur, either due to an unintended journalistic error in reporting or inaccurate information received from sources. For example, local media in New York City report on a wide range of topics concerning the daily life of New Yorkers and those visiting the city for business or tourism purposes. One of them is the Big Apple's subway system, which is no stranger to delays and train route modifications caused

by unexpected incidents or planned service changes. Now, imagine a scenario in which a journalist of a local website is working on a report about the delays and decides to collect information from the MTA website, which serves as an official source of information regarding transportation in New York City. If the MTA website, for instance, reports a delay on the E line when it is the F line that is delayed, then the journalist who relies on the information provided by the MTA website is not telling their readers the truth. However, they are accurately reporting what was posted on the MTA website, from which they learned about the delay. Even though errors like this might happen, what journalists should strive for is to be both truthful and accurate in reporting. The process that should ensure accuracy and set journalistic storytelling apart from other information disseminators online is information verification (Hermida, 2012; Singer, 2015).

Verification is among the values shared not only by American but also by other journalists in democratic countries. As an illustration, a scholarly study that utilized interviews with journalists employed in Australian broadcast organizations showed that these media professionals approached the information they obtained rigorously to ensure that it was accurate before they delivered it to viewers (Martin, 2017). They emphasized the importance of knowledge about the topic prior to inspecting information collected on the web and then cross-checking it with other sources until one is certain of its credibility. Hermida (2015) described the process of verification as the cornerstone of journalism that distinguishes it from other forms of communication. However, he suggested that this practice is being challenged by the urge for immediacy in online journalism, especially when news media are delivering breaking news. This occurs as media in a digital ecosystem are pressed to produce and disseminate news at high speed while simultaneously needing to ensure the reports they provide are credible; otherwise, they face the risk of losing the trust of their audiences (Hermida, 2015). Martin (2017) suggested that the fact that we live in the era of information overload, where citizens are frequently exposed to misinformation or biased stories that align with their emotional appeals, amplifies the process of verification in journalism, prompting journalists to exercise their roles as information authenticators.

Independence and Neutrality

Journalists' job is to deliver the news to the public daily (Deuze, 2005), and when performing this task, they need to remain independent actors from outside influence (Hujanen, 2016). Independence is one of the core values of journalism. It enables practitioners of this profession to manufacture news without censorship or control by authorities, businesspeople, or other powerful entities. Being independent and impartial is "necessary for journalists and journalism to deliver news the public can trust" (Pavlik et al., 2020, p. 398). Hence, independence enables journalists to provide unbiased and reliable information, which is essential to fostering public trust and upholding the integrity of the profession. On that account, independence occupies a prominent place in the "Elements of Journalism," where Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) highlighted that journalism practitioners "must maintain independence from those they cover" (p. 161).

Independence does not only translate into autonomy from authorities. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) also suggested that journalistic independence entails intellectual independence or independence of spirit and mind. This notion contributes to the understanding of frequently contested principles in journalism—neutrality and objectivity. Muñoz-Torres (2012), for instance, described objectivity as a fuzzy concept but still pointed out that some of the ideas shared among diverse explanations of objectivity include journalists being neutral in reporting by relying on facts and refraining from expressing opinions. He also stressed that evaluating facts cannot be free of judgment because "factual knowledge cannot be dissociated from subjective perception and, consequently, from man's capacity to judge" (p. 573). Hellmueller et al. (2013) indicated that scholars have incorporated diverse components into the concepts of objectivity. Regardless, there are components they noted were common among diverse studies, and they include factualness, balance, neutrality, and detachment. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) acknowledged that objectivity might cause confusion and that it should be perceived as the method of collecting information that involves gathering facts and talking to multiple sources, rather than expecting journalists to be free of bias. Hence, the two scholars recognized that journalists cannot be entirely objective, as

they are shaped by their values, culture, and education. In fact, news media also produce journalistic pieces that could be located on the opposite side of neutrality but still contribute to quality journalism, as they abide by vital principles of the profession, such as accuracy and verification. Examples include opinion pieces in which journalists strive to demonstrate intellectual independence while supplying citizens with facts they use to construct and support their arguments. Therefore, even though one cannot evaluate facts without previous concepts or values (Muñoz-Torres, 2012), there is still room for journalists to embrace an objective method of reporting that would place emphasis on testing assumptions and engaging in the verification of information that will give accuracy supremacy over one's personal perceptions and biases (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Transparency, Interactivity, and Immediacy

One of the elements of journalism that has gained prominence in a digital ecosystem is transparency. In journalism, transparency means being open about the methods of news gathering and sources used in a story (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). To be transparent about information delivered—whether it is confirmed or not confirmed—is important as it contributes to trust-building between news organizations and their audiences (Hermida, 2015). The reason transparency, as a journalistic principle, is being frequently discussed in relation to twenty-first-century media is that what happens on the internet appears visible to everyone, which makes journalists more vigilant in selecting information and verifying it (Hermida, 2015; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Singer, 2015).

In the evolving news landscape, where information flows rapidly and the public has greater access to a variety of sources, transparency is critical in building credibility and trust. This concept has become increasingly relevant in response to a shift from the traditional to the contemporary environment. As Karlsson (2011) noticed, in a transmission medium such as television, it would be literally impossible for an average user to actively contribute, criticize, or change news stories (p. 285). On the other hand, news websites, for instance,

enable users to see where the information came from through the links to sources journalists provide in their stories. Evidently, the online environment opens the space for participation and for users to witness how news is being produced and disseminated. Hellmueller et al. (2013) hypothesized that journalists who grew up in the online environment were more likely to embrace transparency than non-net natives. They looked into two forms of transparency earlier proposed by Karlsson (2011), including disclosure transparency, which is reflected in journalists' practice of being open about news production, and participatory transparency, which engages users in news production. After surveying newspaper journalists in the United States, Hellmueller et al. (2013) found a significant difference between journalists who consider themselves net natives and non-net natives in embracing disclosure transparency. While net natives were more likely to adopt disclosure transparency, no differences were found between them and non-net natives in embracing participatory transparency. In addition, the survey data showed that journalists who are socialized into the networked online environment differed in embracing participatory transparency, which Hellmueller et al. (2013) interpreted as the tendency of socialized journalists to "believe that readers' contribution adds to journalists' truth-telling strategy" (p. 297).

Aside from transparency, another distinctive feature of a contemporary news media ecology is its interactive nature, which has paved the way for more active and intense user engagement with content. McMillan (2006) identified three forms of interactivity in a computer-mediated media environment: human-to-human, human-to-documents, and human-to-system. A digitized media environment accommodates all these forms of interaction, as it allows users to communicate to varying extents with each other and with content produced on digital platforms. Interactive features such as comment sections, polls, live chats, and multimedia elements have certainly enriched the user experience, creating a more engaging news ecosystem that is responsive to the audiences' needs and preferences.

Although interactivity is among the key requisites of a technology-mediated news culture that media professionals have committed to (Robinson, 2011), this journalism tenet has been present in legacy media as well, with examples that include letters to the editors, sharing documents with news professionals,

or participating in broadcast programming, which allowed audiences to share their perspectives on current events and related topics (Hájek et al., 2014; McMillan, 2006; Pantic, 2018). In the web-centric news environment, however, this phenomenon is being revisited as new media technologies open a broad spectrum of opportunities for users to interact with news content, news producers, and news entities. One particular form of interactivity that has a prominent place in journalism research is user participation in content creation, which can be tied to what McMillan (2006) labeled as human-to-document interactivity. In this context, interactivity means that "the way in which news stories are told can be rearranged and challenged, and a greater variety of voices and different competing descriptions of events can be heard" (Karlsson, 2011, p. 286). Diverse interactive features allow citizens to participate in news production, including but not limited to sections on websites reserved for user-produced stories, blogs, and comment threads (Graham & Wright, 2015; Pantic, 2018; Thurman, 2008).

There are multiple benefits to news organizations with respect to user input. For instance, comment threads give room to news readers to exchange arguments on a variety of issues and thus interact not only with the content itself but also with one another and journalists who produce news. Comments frequently supplement the news with alternative perspectives and also allow people with expertise on specific issues to contribute to storytelling by sharing their knowledge (Graham & Wright, 2015). This interaction not only deepens engagement with the content but also builds communities that foster the exchange of ideas and opinions. When they open channels for such dialogue, news outlets can tap into the collective wisdom of their audiences.

Whether they report stories in an interactive or noninteractive media ecology, journalists supply audiences with current information, stories that happened today or yesterday, days or weeks ago (Bender et al., 2023). The novelty of information is a defining element of news (Deuze, 2005, p. 449). This element of journalism is labeled timeliness, and it represents an inherent quality of news reporting that has reestablished itself in a contemporary news ecology. Scholars and journalists are nowadays more inclined to use the term "immediacy" than "timeliness" in relation to digital media practice embedded in the immediate dissemination of information that enables users to access the latest developments

about an event. Immediacy, thus, represents a tenet of a digital media ecosystem where journalists update stories in real time and where readers are enabled to react to news as it happens (Deuze, 2005). It is "the measure of professional journalistic competition that privileges speed of reporting over all else" (Baym, 2009, p. 377). This element of journalism is particularly salient among digital journalists who design live blogs or news pieces that give readers a stream of updates on running events. In fact, this news principle has been found to be the key motivating factor for live-blog consumption (Pantic, 2020a). Journalists who produce live blogs feel the urge to constantly supply audiences with new information to keep them engaged (McEnnis, 2016).

In the twenty-first-century media ecosystem, news organizations are creating and distributing stories "while events are running," making the production process accelerated, which "raises expectations of readers to obtain information at high speed" (Pantic, 2020a, p. 159). This practice affects other elements of journalism, especially truth-telling and accuracy. When journalists produce several drafts of a story, or when they provide live updates of events, audiences receive diverse, sometimes conflicting information, which in a way collides with the first principle of journalism (Karlsson, 2011). Therefore, in the news production process that takes place 24/7, journalists are faced with the challenge of balancing their commitment to accuracy with the need for speed. This is not to say that errors are common in the digital world, where journalists are under pressure to deliver information as soon as they acquire it. Maintaining high standards of news delivery, especially among mainstream media, makes them cautious in releasing information too quickly (Zeller & Hermida, 2015). As an illustration, the BBC has demonstrated its commitment to accuracy with a statement embedded in its Editorial Guidelines that clearly indicates the supremacy of accuracy over speed in publishing news ("Section 3: Accuracy—guidelines," n.d.).

Citizens' Perception of Journalism Principles

In this chapter, readers have been introduced to the main journalism principles and how they evolved over time. To go beyond theoretical concepts, I have

collected and analyzed data from a convenient sample of news consumers to gain insight into how citizens perceive contemporary journalism. This is particularly relevant as the book's center of attention is illuminated in news literacy and participation, thus highlighting the role of consumers in the news production process and information dissemination. Specifically, the focus of this exploratory research study was to understand what principles of journalism citizens expect to be embedded in the news they read and how citizens evaluate the implementation of journalistic principles in a digitized news environment. A survey was constructed to assess citizens' perspectives and then distributed to participants who were recruited from two pools. First, survey data were collected from students who study communications at a private university on the East Coast of the United States. Second, respondents were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk, which is a crowdsourcing marketplace operated by Amazon, an American technology company. Qualtrics, an online software, was utilized in data collection that started in March and ended in July 2023. Upon closing the study, data were exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which was used for analysis. A data cleaning process was performed, allowing incomplete responses to be removed from the data set. Finally, 333 complete questionnaires were identified and analyzed.

To determine which journalism principles citizens expect to be embedded in the news they read in a digitized news environment, the survey asked respondents a question, "What is the most important to you when it comes to the news you read online?" The question was followed by eight statements, and respondents were asked to select all that applied. These statements included (1) news must be truthful; (2) everything in a news story must be accurate; (3) every piece of information in a news story must be verified; (4) news must be created independently, without outside influence; (5) news must be free from bias; (6) it should be stated clearly how journalists obtained information presented in a story; (7) comments should be enabled for news stories; and (8) news must be reported immediately after a journalist obtains information about an event/issue. In addition, respondents were asked an open-ended question about journalism principles: Is there anything else that you feel is important to you regarding the news you read online?

To investigate how citizens evaluate the implementation of journalism principles in a digitized news environment, eight statements were listed, and respondents were asked to state the level of agreement with each on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The statements reflected key journalistic principles, and they included (1) news media deliver the truth to citizens (truth); (2) news media deliver information that is correct (accuracy); (3) news media verify the information before delivering it to citizens (verification); (4) news media remain independent from outside influence when delivering news (independence); (5) news media refrain from taking sides when reporting the news (neutrality); (6) news media are open about the methods of news gathering and sources used in news (transparency); (7) news media provide opportunities for citizens to engage with news by reacting to them (e.g., posting comments, liking news, recommending them) (interactivity); and (8) news media report the news about events as soon as they learn about them (immediacy).

Demography-wise, there were 49.8 percent males and 48.9 percent females in the sample. Four respondents identified as nonbinary. The survey participants predominantly represented the Generation Y cohort, or millennials (44.4 percent). The age range of this cohort at the time the data were collected was 27 to 42. They were followed by a group aged 43 to 58, or people belonging to Generation X (27.6 percent), and Generation Z (17.4 percent), or those whose age was 18 to 26 at the time of survey data collection. There were also 10.5 percent of baby boomers in the sample (ages 59 to 77). With respect to the participants' race, the majority of respondents—74.8 percent—were white, followed by African American (11.4 percent) and Asian (7.2 percent). About 3.9 percent represented other races, ethnicities, or origin, while 2.7 percent identified that they were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

Data analysis revealed that delivering the truth to citizens was the most widely chosen principle of journalism in the survey. To be precise, 279 (83.8 percent) out of 333 respondents in the sample selected this choice when asked what is the most important to them when it comes to the news they read online. This journalism tenet was followed by accuracy (202 respondents, or 60.7 percent) and neutrality (194 respondents, or 58.3 percent). Evidently, the survey respondents expected the news media to deliver correct, truthful

reports, free of bias. Other journalistic principles assessed in the survey appeared less relevant in comparison to the three top traditional tenets, as they were selected by less than 50 percent of respondents. For instance, verification of information as a principle that citizens expect to be present in the news they read was selected by 148 survey respondents (44.4 percent), while independence was selected by 120 (36 percent), transparency by 109 (32.7 percent), interactivity by 81 (24.3 percent), and immediacy by 31 (9.3 percent).

Aside from looking into the principles of journalism that citizens expect to see in the news, the survey also assessed how respondents evaluate the implementation of journalistic principles in a digitized news environment. Data analysis showed that respondents felt that news media deliver the news to them in a timely manner ($M = 3.58$; $SD = 1.00$) and allow opportunities for deeper engagement ($M = 3.55$; $SD = .96$). These two principles, immediacy and interactivity, were among the most salient features of the contemporary media environment. And while respondents were satisfied with their implementation, they simultaneously felt that news media are not as effective in implementing highly relevant and traditional journalistic principles such as neutrality and independence. See Table 1.1 for more details.

To further investigate this issue, a statistical test, ANOVA, was performed with a focus on potential differences among the survey respondents in their perception of implementation of journalism principles based on where they primarily search for news online—whether it is through news websites (e.g., the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Cable News Network (CNN), BBC, Huffington Post, etc.), social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, etc.), news aggregator sites (e.g., Google News, Yahoo News, Apple News, Feedly, etc.), forums and online communities (e.g., Reddit, Quora, Discord, etc.), or other sources, all of which will be discussed in more detail in this book. The test showed statistically significant differences among respondents related to how they perceive the implementation of the following journalism principles: delivering the truth [$F(4, 328) = 4.12, p = .003$]; accuracy [$F(4, 328) = 3.54$, $p = .008$]; information verification [$F(4, 328) = 3.16$, $p = .014$]; and transparency [$F(4, 328) = 2.38$, $p = .05$]. In all cases, the mean number was highest for those survey respondents who primarily turn to news websites

Table 1.1 *Implementation of Journalistic Principles in a Digitized News Environment*

Principles	Mean	Standard Deviation
News media report the news about events as soon as they learn about them (immediacy)	3.58	1.00
News media provide opportunities for citizens to engage with news by reacting to them (e.g., posting comments, liking news, recommending them) (interactivity)	3.55	.96
News media deliver information that is correct (accuracy)	3.50	.95
News media deliver the truth to citizens (truth)	3.43	.96
News media verify the information before delivering it to citizens (verification)	3.40	1.00
News media are open about the methods of news gathering and sources used in news (transparency)	3.14	1.09
News media remain independent from outside influence when delivering news (independence)	2.89	1.19
News media refrain from taking sides when reporting the news (neutrality)	2.77	1.19

in their search for news, followed by news aggregator sites, while for those likely to obtain the news through social media platforms and online forums, the mean number showing their perception of implementation of journalism principles in a digitized news environment was close to the neutral point. See Table 1.2 for more details.

Prior to reflecting on the findings in more depth, it must be emphasized that this was an exploratory study, and as such, its results should be interpreted within the scope of their limitations. First, the sample was composed of students and Amazon Turk workers who had been paid to complete questionnaires. For this reason, the results derived from the survey cannot be generalizable to the entire population. Second, the study focused on the US-based population and their attitudes about modern journalism shaped by their experiences with American media, which is frequently accused of bias in reporting. Thus, the results of this research are limited to the US media context. Still, the findings draw attention to highly relevant journalistic principles that citizens perceive as somewhat neglected in the age of social media, where opinions and attitudes appear to have supremacy over facts.

Regardless of the aforementioned limitations, it is evident from the results that delivering the truth in journalism has remained what Kovach

Table 1.2 *Differences in Perception of Implementation of Journalism Principles Based on the Platforms Used to Search for News*

Platforms to Search for News	Average Values for Journalism Principles							
	Truth		Accuracy		Verification		Transparency	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
News Websites	3.67	.82	3.72	.91	3.54	.96	3.35	1.08
Social Media	3.21	1.00	3.27	.96	3.20	1.03	3.01	1.07
News Aggregator Sites	3.55	.96	3.59	.92	3.59	.96	3.17	1.14
Forums and Online Communities	3.18	.97	3.38	.92	3.21	1.01	3.00	.99
Other Sources	3.20	1.30	3.20	1.30	2.80	1.10	2.20	1.30

and Rosenstiel labeled the first principle of journalism, whose relevance is embodied in the notion that it creates "the sense of security that grows from awareness and is at the essence of news" (2021, p. 43). In a contemporary news environment, citizens hold journalists accountable for truthful and trustworthy portrayals of events, considering that a great majority of respondents stressed that truth should be a fundamental part of news delivered to them via digital media channels. The need for information that accurately depicts reality appears to clearly manifest itself in the age we live in, noticeable by a wide presence of disinformation designed to cause harm. Fake news, for instance, is a phenomenon that mainly exists outside the media realm, and it is being easily disseminated and consumed via social media platforms (Waisbord, 2018). This could explain why the respondents who were more likely to search for news on social media and online forums had less faith in news media's mission to deliver the truth and provide accurate information than those respondents who primarily acquired news directly from online news websites such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, and BBC, and news aggregator sites (e.g., Apple News, Google News, Yahoo News). The credibility of social media is challenged by a vast array of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news that still present an issue, even though big players such as Facebook and Twitter have tried to suppress them by labeling false content (Pavlik,

2021). Therefore, the perception regarding the implementation of journalism principles of those users who search for news outside the news media sphere might be clouded by their frequent exposure to not necessarily reliable sources that produce and disseminate information through social media.

Waisbord (2018) has noted that the concept of truth in journalism cannot be separated from those who consume the news. He stated that "notions of news and truth are linked to what people do with information rather than what journalism unilaterally decides are accurate portrayals of reality" (p. 1872). Bearing in mind that the truth not only involves people's interaction with the information obtained but also their engagement in the news production process (Deuze, 2005; Hujanen, 2016), the current research also examined citizens' perception of their role in the implementation of journalism principles that provide space for their deeper engagement with news. The study results supply scholarly literature with clear evidence that citizens have reached a new level of news consumption as they see themselves taking an active role in the implementation of several journalism principles, such as inspecting the accuracy of information provided by news media, sharing opinions about news articles, and collaborating with news media in the verification of information and delivering the truth. Such practice is labeled as participatory journalism, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the aforementioned principles of journalism are embodied in tasks where journalists could be assisted by readers, taking advantage of the key features of the digital news ecosystem—interactivity and transparency. As Hermida (2012) explained, journalists who work in an online media environment engage in diverse activities with those who consume the news, including the process of collaborative verification of information. In addition, prominent media organizations, such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, highlight errors in their articles noted by both their staff and readers, which aids user engagement in the implementation of journalism tenets.

This exploratory research also sheds light on a significant issue that poses challenges to already shattered trust between media and content consumers. Respondents expressed disagreement with the statements that news media remain independent and refrain from taking sides when delivering news. Although American news media are frequently accused of being biased

("American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," 2023; Walker & Gottfried, 2020), falling into either the right (e.g., Fox News) or the left side of the political spectrum (e.g., the *New York Times*), this notion might not only be the result of the trust deficit in the media. An omnipresent argument culture combined with the lack of media literacy makes it challenging for people to distinguish the news coming from media sources from that disseminated by anonymous social media users.

Shoulder to shoulder with neutrality is journalistic independence. Distrust in the media, along with the struggle of news organizations to be financially viable, are key challenges to preserving the independent press ("American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," 2023). This is detected as an issue among the current study participants, who suggested that news media are failing to accomplish their mission of being independent of outside influence. Furthermore, the analysis showed no differences between respondents in their perception of news media neutrality and independence based on the platforms used to search for news. This implies that the lack of trust is present regardless of whether users obtain their news through news sites, social media, news aggregators, or online forums. Such a finding aligns with the recent discovery by the Knight Foundation and Gallup that trust in the media in the United States has declined in past years. This is evident through their 2022 survey, which showed that 26 percent of Americans had "a favorable opinion of the news media, the lowest level Gallup and Knight have recorded in the past five years, while 53% hold an unfavorable view" ("American Views 2022: Part 2, Trust Media and Democracy," 2023, para. 9). Hence, even though the combative nature of social media users and widespread science denial online tend to obscure the work of professional journalism, they are not the only ones to blame for shattered trust in the media.

In conclusion, people do have an intrinsic need to consume news (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). This drive stems from their desire to be informed, gain knowledge, understand the world around them, and make rational decisions about their lives. They also consume news out of curiosity. In the contemporary media ecology, citizens are equipped with tools that enable them to acquire the information they need to make decisions about their lives—from what to wear based on weather forecasts to investing in stocks if business news reports and

analysts suggest that the market outlook is positive. Being without reliable, trustworthy information could compare to navigating in the woods without a compass. The issue is, however, that we live in the age of information overload, the rapid spread of fake news, and emotionally loaded discussions about current events that tend to obscure our news judgment. On the bright side, citizens acknowledge that their news consumption is being jeopardized by the culture of clashing, extreme viewpoints, prompting them to advocate for more neutral, unbiased portrayals of events. They also expect news media to deliver trustworthy, verified information and are willing to contribute to truthful storytelling by participating in certain components of news production and distribution, such as inspecting accuracy and commenting on stories. A clever media response to such expectations is to allow users' input to the extent that it does not pose a threat to their mission to supply citizens with facts that empower them to make informed decisions.

2

News Literacy

Sources in the News

When a young reporter enters a newsroom and informs their editor of a news tip they have just obtained, the first thing that the editor will ask them is most likely going to be, "Who is your source?" If the person who shared the information with the reporter is considered reliable and relevant, the editor will ask the reporter to further investigate the issue and write a piece on it. If the tip finds its way to the reporter from an unknown source and resembles a potential rumor, the editor might just suggest that the reporter disregard it, unless there are other sources or indicators that something could be hiding behind the initial rumor. The reason for increased caution is the obligation of journalists to ensure the information they provide to citizens is accurate and reliable.

Journalists' daily routine entails selecting information from a vast array of sources. Communicating with people is a cornerstone of this profession, as "news is being produced through a series of interactions between news organizations and their socio-cultural environment" (Tiffen et al., 2014, p. 374). Media professionals attend press conferences, roundtables, live events, panel discussions, and various committee meetings. They visit libraries, courts, and government agencies to obtain relevant documents. To find information valuable enough to be incorporated into their stories, journalists also surf the web. Hence, the sources they utilize, either representing people or documents, most of the time exist outside a news organization's space, and they are essential in crafting news. It is critical that journalists rely on trustworthy sources and employ rigorous fact-checking of information obtained; otherwise, they risk losing credibility. This is of particular significance in the era we live in,

which is characterized by the inflation of information and the easy spread of disinformation or other types of false stories.

According to Lecheler and Kruikemeier (2016), "news sources define the reality of news coverage and give structure to the news production process" (p. 158). News sources in news stories are among the key indicators that the story is real, not fake (Tsang, 2021). Stories can contain anywhere from one to dozens of sources. As an illustration, a report from a press conference organized by a prominent individual, such as the Secretary of State, is likely to contain only one source if no other official has spoken at the said event. A news article about a court decision might have three or more sources—the judge in the case, the plaintiff or the person who brought the case in court against the defendant, and the defense attorney. On the other hand, live blogs that are utilized in journalism to provide coverage of events in real time in the form of live updates frequently have a double-digit number of sources. For instance, the news website, the *Guardian*, which is a pioneer in live blogging, feeds on a variety of sources to report on many topics. Pantic et al. (2017), who explored diversity of sources in running news coverage of events, found that live blogs on this news outlet's site that covered conflicts across the globe had about fifty-seven sources on average, while those used to cover politics had forty-three. Based on the findings of this study, the double-digit number of sources was also detected for coverage of events related to social issues, economics, and sports.

The number of sources speaks of the abundance of viewpoints present in a news story (Tiffen et al., 2014). A reader can identify numerous sources in the story that could be classified as formal and informal, depending on the types of individuals and entities they represent. Formal sources are most likely to have some form of official status, which is why they can also be labeled as official sources. These sources of information are embodied in governments, politicians, international and domestic organizations, public figures, corporate representatives, scientists, or other subject-matter experts. They can also take the form of documents published by relevant institutions, such as press releases, court rulings, or labor statistics. Informal or unofficial sources, on the other hand, are usually reflected in ordinary people, those not holding an official status and thus less likely to be widely known. These sources provide

relevant information as they witness an event or have a stake in an issue as community members or activists. Both formal and informal sources are critical in a comprehensive portrayal of events. For instance, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology could serve as a formal source for a story about Amazon rainforest conservation. On the other hand, an example of an informal source would be a passenger who shares their frustration over flight delays at a local airport with the reporter who is interviewing them. In both cases, it is important that sources have the knowledge related to the topic discussed or that they have witnessed or have been affected by newsworthy events. They need to possess credibility and be willing to communicate in a timely manner (van der Meer et al., 2017).

According to Manninen (2017), journalists use official sources routinely, and in many cases, the trustworthiness of such sources, examples including press releases issued by the police, is assumed. After studying the searching, evaluation, and use of sources among Finnish journalists, Manninen also detected that source selection can be founded on pragmatic trust, meaning that journalists use sources they trust enough because of pragmatic reasons. Those reasons may simply reflect the fact that the source is useful for a story—it is available, has expertise pertaining to the issue, and the journalist collecting information has previous experience with the source that makes it valuable for the story. They also heavily rely on government sources, especially when covering science-related and health topics. When Catalan-Matamoros and Elías (2020) investigated media sourcing practices in newspapers in Spain in covering vaccination-related topics, they found that official sources, those representing government officials, professional organizations, and scientific companies, were dominant in news articles. Sources representing civil society, according to the study findings, were present in small amounts—as they accounted for 5 percent of the total number of sources. Such a finding further illustrates the relevance of reliable, informed, and trusted sources in the coverage of issues of public concern, especially those requiring scientific scrutiny.

When selecting and presenting sources in their stories, journalists adhering to the standards of their professions refrain from taking sides (Berkowitz, 2019). In other words, they lean toward neutrality, one of the key tenets of

journalism, discussed in the previous chapter. Demonstrating commitment to obeying professional norms means that a reporter covering an event, such as a protest or political rally, will refrain from advocating for one side or the other. Instead, what is expected of the reporter is to describe the setting, talk to people, and organize the facts into a story based on which an audience can make their own judgment about the event (Berkowitz, 2019). Having such a balanced story does not necessarily mean that a reader, a viewer, or a listener will always be presented with an equal amount of information coming from two opposing sides, such as governmental and opposition sources. In fact, when Tiffen et al. (2014) examined sources used across diverse news media in nine countries, including Australia, Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, they found that those representing politicians from the governing parties were more frequently utilized than those that represented the opposition. This is not surprising and does not mean that journalists are being biased by focusing more on government sources. Policymaking is in the hands of ruling parties, not the opposition, and journalists' duty is to deliver the information to citizens that impacts their lives, meaning that they need to report on the work of the government and its consequences for the public.

Aside from official sources reflected in government structures, among the dominant sources in the news are those representing public relations. Their role in journalism is important, considering that public relations (PR) sources manage the flow of information between an organization and the public. These sources are reflected in press briefings, conferences, press releases, and other public relations material. Even though PR sources are affordable and convenient, their primary goal is to create and maintain a favorable image of individuals and organizations they represent, which can have an impact on journalistic independence (Franklin et al., 2009). However, good journalism should not be concerned about that, as it goes beyond a press release copy received from a PR agency and searches for information from other relevant sources before putting it together into a story for its audience.

Global connectedness through the internet has allowed journalists to easily reach for sources outside their geographical areas. This is beneficial for journalism, as it provides them with access to diverse perspectives, enables

them to report remotely, increases their sourcing pool, and allows them to cross-reference information by consulting multiple sources. Journalists can speak about relevant topics with experts who live in different parts of the world, using platforms such as ProfNet to connect with such sources (Pavlik, 1999). Specifically, they can use ProfNet to submit their queries along with an explanation of the kind of expertise they need, filtering their request by geographic location and waiting for the expert to respond ("Creating Content and Need Expert Sources," n.d.). Aside from this platform, there are others, such as Connectively and Qwoted, which are specifically designed to serve as a network point connecting media with experts and other sources. Journalists also have a vast array of other options online to seek individuals to talk to for their stories, including through social networking sites or email addresses of these individuals. One of the common ways among reporters to search for sources is to add a #JournoRequest hashtag to a tweet on platform X, formerly known as Twitter. Other than that, journalists can obtain contact information about individuals relevant for their stories, such as experts or celebrities, through websites, where they can get in touch with them or their PR managers directly and request an interview via Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp, or another video platform. These are all legitimate ways to reach out to sources and communicate with them. They have been normalized since the introduction of new technologies in the media industry that allow journalists to go beyond their traditional practice of searching for the interviewees known and convenient to them and talking to those sources in person or over the phone.

In fact, social networking sites have become integral to the process of source searching. They do not solely represent spaces designed for social interactions but also a hub for news dissemination. Social media accommodate a plethora of information, ranging from text to audio and video files (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). Therefore, they are suitable for use by diverse media, from newspapers and websites to radio and television. A variety of social actors, including politicians, celebrities, organizations, and businesses, disseminate information on social media. Among the many platforms available to them, Facebook remains the most popular one. Data provided by Statista, a reputable German portal for market data, shows that this social media platform is the leader in the number of monthly active users. Specifically, more than 3 billion

users are active on this platform every month, followed by YouTube, which has about 2.5 billion monthly active users, and Instagram and WhatsApp, with 2 million each (Dixon, 2024). According to the same source, TikTok, which was established by a Chinese startup in 2016 and is the youngest among the aforementioned companies, holds the fifth position, with about 1.58 billion monthly active users. Platform X, which remains a popular source for journalists in their search for information, had about 611 such users in 2024.

Looking into the numbers above, it is evident why social media have become an indispensable part of journalism but also why these platforms occupy a great deal of attention from media and journalism scholars. In the area of information gathering for news production, multiple scholarly studies have explored what social media platforms news organizations mainly derive their information from and what type of sources they predominantly use (e.g., Kapidzic et al., 2022; Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2020; von Nordheim et al., 2018). For instance, Pantic and Cvetkovic (2020) examined the use of social media in news production among ten major US-based websites. They found that Twitter was leading as a platform that supplies online news media with sources, as about 75 percent of sources found in all articles in the sample came from this platform, followed by YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. According to this study, entertainment was the section with the highest number of social media sources, followed by politics and sports. Pantic and Cvetkovic (2020) also learned that institutional, official sources dominated over nonofficial sources in the stories that utilized information from social media. Similarly, von Nordheim et al. (2018) found that major US and European newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, were more likely to utilize official rather than other sources from Twitter. On the other hand, their analysis showed that when it came to Facebook sources, both official and unofficial sources were utilized in similar amounts. Furthermore, in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, Twitter was mostly used in the stories that belonged to the sections representing incidents, crimes, culture/arts, media/tech, sports, and politics, while in the case of Facebook, sources were mostly used for stories on crime and media/tech (von Nordheim et al., 2018, p. 819). Interestingly, political sources from Twitter were not dominant in the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* stories, while these sources were used from Facebook.

The authors of the study suggested that a potential explanation could be that political parties in Germany, rather than individual politicians, hold the keys to political communication with the public, and Facebook appears to be a more suitable platform for sharing information by an organization.

After examining the use of Twitter in newspapers, tabloids, weekly magazines, broadcast, and internet media in Germany, Kapidzic et al. (2022) learned that about 70 percent of Twitter references embedded in the analyzed articles came from verified sources. According to the study, Twitter was most likely to be utilized in sections covering politics and the economy, followed by crime/disaster and sports. This further demonstrates that journalists prefer traditional sourcing methods when utilizing sources from social media (Kapidzic et al., 2022). These methods are evidently seen as essential to ensure that the information obtained on social media comes from credible sources. As they understand that social media content may be subject to manipulation and bias, they find it necessary to vet the information through conventional journalism verification practices before incorporating it into their stories.

The way news media select sources varies in diverse parts of the globe, and it is impacted by press freedoms that differ across countries, as well as the cultural context and relationships built between reporters and sources. In Japan, for instance, where journalism is under the impact of the country's traditional values and culture, sources are most likely to present officials and their viewpoints, while in the Netherlands and other countries with greater media freedoms, news goes beyond utilizing mostly information coming from the government and other official sources (Berkowitz, 2019). Zhang's and Li's (2020) study showed that in Hong Kong, for example, journalists predominantly utilize traditional methods of information collection and verification, such as in-person conversations, phone interviews, and data obtained from the government and other relevant institutions. Social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, multimedia hosting and sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, Flickr), and content communities and crowdfunding sites (e.g., Wikipedia) were also used for sourcing and information purposes, but less frequently than traditional sources. According to the same study, journalists were neutral when asked to express their level of agreement with a statement that social media represents a reliable tool for sourcing. Those who believed in

the reliability of sources on social media were also more likely to use them for information gathering and verification (Zhang & Li, 2020).

Professional standards that journalists are expected to adhere to require them to be transparent about sources they utilize and to quote the individuals they interview precisely. There have been, however, cases in recent media history when certain journalists failed to obey professional norms and used deception and fabrication in news reporting. Such examples include Stephen Glass, an infamous serial fabricator who went to extremes in his fraudulent activities, making up stories and entire events, then writing about them as if they were real. Glass was even supporting his false story constructions with fake business cards and notes of never-conducted interviews when working for the *New Republic* in the 1990s (Rosin, 2014). His infamous work cost him a job and career in journalism. And while Glass did not win major accolades for his fabrications, Janet Cooke, another former journalist known for her ill-famed work, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981 for the story she completely made up. It was a piece titled "Jimmy's World" that earned Cooke the prestigious award for achievements in journalism when she was in her twenties, working for the *Washington Post*. The story about an 8-year-old addicted to heroin was published on the front page of the prominent newspaper and reprinted globally (Sager, 2016, para. 5). Although very engaging and intriguing, the article had one major issue—it was fake. Jimmy, a young drug addict whose tragic childhood was vividly portrayed in Cooke's article, thankfully never existed. You might probably wonder why authorities never reacted to the story and searched for the boy to rescue him. In fact, they did; they wanted to find the boy's parents to prosecute them, but the *Washington Post* decided to call for the US Constitution's First Amendment[1] rights and protect Cooke from revealing her sources (Sager, 2016, para. 5). However, the public interest in the story, combined with certain suspicions among the newspaper staff about the story's truthfulness, as well as the authorities' failed attempts to find the child, resulted in more pressure on Cooke until she admitted that the story was fabricated. Learning this, the *Washington Post* returned the Pulitzer in what one of its former reporters, Eugene L. Meyer (2021), described as "the lowest point for the newspaper" (para. 1).

Among other infamous examples is the one of Jayson Blair, a former *New York Times* reporter who committed multiple frauds by fabricating and plagiarizing information and sources in his reports (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Blair's act, along with those of other reporters, not only caused them to depart from journalism for good but also caused damage to their respective organizations. Although these cases in journalism are not the norm, they are still relevant to investigate and discuss. In fact, such cases prompted researchers to examine common indicators that could reveal problematic news articles and deceptive journalism. For instance, Govaert et al. (2020) looked into the case of Dutch journalist Perdiep Ramesar, who used nonexistent sources in more than 100 articles he published in the newspaper *Trouw*. They found that the sources in his stories that he made up were representatives of marginalized groups and other nonofficial sources that are not widely accessed in news reports that utilized real sources. Furthermore, he stereotyped groups of people and referenced ethnicity to a greater extent than in truthful articles, clearly basing his writing on assumptions rather than observations of reality. Secondary definers, or unofficial made-up sources that Ramesar utilized in his false stories, were accompanied by long quotations (Govaert et al., 2020). This is not to say that long quotes and representation of marginalized groups directly imply that there is deception involved, as there are multiple indicators that could point to potential issues. In the case of Ramesar's fabricated stories, similar to previous research, commonly identified elements that differ in comparison to truthful stories included the domination of unofficial sources, stereotyping, the use of negation words, self-referencing, and long direct quotes (Govaert et al., 2020). It is a primary responsibility of news organizations to detect such problematic reports produced by their staff. However, identifying these elements might also help a news consumer navigate a complex, abundant sea of information in the digital age.

Authenticity of News Media Sources

Now that you have a foundational understanding of the various sources journalists utilize in news stories, we can investigate a wider picture and

look into another important element of the news environment—how readers select which news source to access to obtain news. In the complexity of the internet and the abundance of content its users are exposed to, what tools do they use to distinguish between news stories that come, for instance, from PR agencies and crowdfunding sites, versus those created by news organizations? Considering that we live in an era in which distinguishing between journalistic and non-journalistic content might be challenging, how do readers know if a news source is authentic and can be trusted?

News media sources encompass a wide range of mass media, from newspapers to broadcast and news websites. Newspapers have been a trustworthy source for Americans for decades, but they continue to decline due to the changes in consumer behavior and their shift to online news. Based on the data published in the Press Gazette, the UK-based magazine dedicated to journalism, and provided by the Alliance for Audited Media, a not-for-profit organization, among the top twenty-five newspapers in the United States based on their circulation, the top one, the *Wall Street Journal*, had an average weekday print circulation of a little over half a million (about 555,200). According to the same source, second on the list is the *New York Times* with 267,600 distributed daily copies, and the third one is the *New York Post* with about 131,200 (Majid, 2024). Among the top ten are also the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Star Tribune*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Seattle Times*.

Newspapers cover a broad range of topics and present articles that use formal journalistic language focused on facts. Magazines, on the other hand, whether printed weekly, biweekly, or monthly, supply readers with more specific topics, written in less formal language, discussed in more detail, and frequently in a creative way. Among the most prominent are *TIME*, a biweekly journalism magazine established in 1923, covering politics, science, world events, and other relevant issues in depth, and the *New Yorker*, a weekly New York-based publication recognizable by its intelligent, sophisticated writing and thoroughly examined topics. Issues related to foreign policy receive extensive coverage in *Foreign Affairs*, while business and economics are thoroughly covered by *Bloomberg Businessweek* and the *Economist*, which, although UK-based, still has a wide international audience. There are also magazines

less focused on politics, the economy, and social issues and oriented toward entertainment and sports, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Sports Illustrated*, *US Weekly*, *GQ*, and *Vogue*.

Even though both newspapers and magazines represent print media, in the digital news environment, they have online editions, which enable users outside their geographical area to read the news posted on their websites. A user can subscribe to a newspaper and read its content online instead of purchasing a print copy. The content online goes beyond what a newspaper has to offer in its printed version. The *New York Times*, a successful newspaper subscription story, had more than 10 million subscribers in 2023, which earned the company more than $1 billion (Robertson, 2024). The *Guardian*, a prominent UK-based newspaper with a wide international readership, advertises print subscriptions on its website, while for the digital content, it invites readers to consider donating money to support independent journalism that this media organization is dedicated to.

Wire services or news agencies represent another reliable source of information for consumers in the United States and abroad. Among the most prominent ones are the Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence France-Presse (AFP). Subscriptions to wire services are not designed for individuals, but rather for media and other organizations. The oldest news agency is Agence France-Presse, established in Paris, France, in 1835. According to the AFP "About us" page (n.d.), the agency has 2,600 employees who represent 100 nationalities and produce information in French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic. Aside from financing its operations from subscriptions, AFP is distinctive by relying partially on public funding as part of its revenue streams. AP was established in 1846 and has been breaking news from different parts of the globe ever since. It is one of the most trustworthy news sources, and it has journalists in about 100 countries and all fifty US states, reaching out to four billion people with its news every day ("About Us," n.d.). These news stories are not being delivered directly to news consumers, at least not the majority of them. Specifically, a news agency collects news through its journalists and correspondents and then distributes it to news organizations that pay for its service. Aside from news organizations, it is common for organizations and institutions, such as political parties and government

agencies, to subscribe to get the news from news agencies. However, the most common clients are news organizations that rely on wire services to obtain news, photographs, graphics, audio clips, and videos about local and global events that their journalists are not covering or where they have no staff. There are many agencies across the globe, and the three listed are the oldest and the most prominent global ones. The Associated Press is also known by the book it publishes called the Associated Press Stylebook, which provides standardized guidance for American journalists on the principles of reporting, grammar, and style they should use when writing for news media.

While the AP is a US-based wire service, Reuters is a news agency established in London in 1851, bringing news from all over the world. Reuters prides itself on having a wide network of journalists and comprehensive reporting. It has about 2,600 journalists in 165 countries providing coverage in twelve languages and delivering 2 million unique news stories ("About Reuters: The World's Largest News Agency," n.d.). Known for its commitment to high journalistic standards, Reuters provides news and financial information to media organizations and businesses across the globe. The agency was acquired by a Canadian information company, Thomson Corporation, in 2008, which resulted in the formation of Thomson Reuters ("Thomson Completes Acquisition of Reuters," 2008).

Aside from the big three, there are other agencies that distribute the news across the globe, many of them slightly different in nature due to the size of their staff and the way their operations are supported. Among them are a Germany-based agency, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA); Washington D.C.-based United Press International (UPI); Xinhua Agency, founded by the Communist Party of China; and Press Trust of India, the largest news agency in India. Over the years, news agencies have stepped up their game. While they started as news services for media organizations, nowadays, they have digital platforms through which they deliver a portion of their news directly to readers. Prior to that, readers could see AP, Reuters, or AFP news primarily through other media, such as TV stations that, when they used Reuters videos in their reporting, had the Reuters logo in the corner or newspapers that would note that the report had been produced by AP or another news agency. Both on websites and in newspapers, these reports are usually distinctive by a

dateline, which is a piece of text that tells a reader where an event happened. For instance, if AP is delivering a report from the White House, this is how the dateline will look: WASHINGTON (AP) —.

Although servicing news organizations, businesses, and institutions remains their priority, news agencies also address the audiences directly, as they publish reports on their websites and post them on social media. AP nowadays has around 16 million followers on platform X, while Reuters has 25.6 million. A reader can confide in these agencies to get factual reports they can rely on from all over the globe. In addition to that, news agencies represent a trusted source among journalists. A study of source utilization among Dutch journalists showed that they most frequently employed news agencies as sources to supply the public with information about crisis events (van der Meer et al., 2017). According to this research, news agencies were more frequently utilized than "the public and the organization undergoing the crisis" (p. 1115).

While news agencies primarily serve news organizations, acting as intermediaries that gather, produce, and distribute the news from different parts of the world, the broadcasting industry communicates to the citizens directly through mediums like television and radio. These powerful tools for mass communication share one important feature with internet platforms for information dissemination—they can deliver real-time updates on events. The most popular television channels in the United States are NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, and Fox News (Stoll, 2024). Aside from these commercial televisions that rely primarily on advertising, there is a noncommercial TV network in the United States, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), committed to delivering programs focused on public affairs, culture, education, and other relevant issues. The radio industry also has a public broadcaster, which is National Public Radio (NPR), based in Washington, D.C., and it represents another reputable source, vital for in-depth journalism topics, educational and cultural programming. TV programming options also include cable television. Among TV news channels that are available via cable are Cable News Network (CNN), with headquarters in Atlanta and focused on both national and international news, as well as its competitor from the United Kingdom, the BBC, or the British Broadcasting Corporation. Both of these channels are known for their

global reach and commitment to reporting that goes beyond daily headlines. They consistently offer stories rooted in investigative journalism and interviews with high-profile individuals, allowing viewers to gain a deeper understanding of significant global issues and events.

Television remains an important medium for news dissemination and news consumption in the United States, regardless of the fact that the largest portion of the US population gets their news through smartphones and other digital devices. Pew Research Center noted that the number of Americans who often get their news from television remains consistent, and it is about 32 percent. In the twenty-first century, the number of options for citizens to watch television content has increased ("News Platform Fact Sheet," 2024). Viewers can access TV programs, news, and shows through cable, satellite, on air, via an antenna, and streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, YouTube TV, and others. According to Nielsen, a company that measures audience behavior across television channels and platforms, the increase in homes that relied on internet connectivity to access TV content was 210 percent from 2018 to 2023 ("Beyond Big Data," 2024). Data from this company also show that the United States has 125 TV households and that 70 percent of them have at least one smart TV, while only a few homes use solely an antenna to receive broadcast programming.

The availability of news sources in the third decade of the twenty-first century is more abundant than ever before. Consumers can access news on their computers, tablets, and smartphones; read newspapers in print or online; watch television broadcasts for breaking news; listen to podcasts on their walks; or tune into the radio when driving to work. With so much variety of media and news sources, a critical question arises—is a digital era-citizen a well-informed individual who trusts the sources they consume, believing they are accurate and reliable? How do they perceive the quality of news they receive across all these platforms, especially considering the role that social media plays in shaping their views? A recent assessment of citizen opinion on news trustworthiness in forty-six countries shows that the highest level of trust in the media in 2023 and 2024 was recorded in Finland, and it was 69 percent, while the lowest was in Greece—19 percent ("Share of Adults Who Trust News Media," 2024). There were variations in people's trust across media

according to this data set, as Hong Kong recorded an increase in trust from 39 percent in 2023 to 55 percent the year after, while the Netherlands had a decline from 57 percent to 54 percent. The United States was lower on the list, taking thirty-seventh place, but it had a steady 32 percent of Americans trusting the news in 2023 and 2024.

When YouGov, a public opinion and data company, surveyed Americans in 2024, asking them to share their perception of the trustworthiness of fifty sources, at the top of the list was not a source focused primarily on news delivery but the Weather Channel, which was established to deliver relevant weather-related information to a broad audience (Orth & Bialik, 2024). Interestingly, the second on the list was not a US-based but a UK-based one—The BBC—followed by another public broadcaster, PBS. Other trustworthy sources include the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, ABC, Reuters, the Associated Press, CBS, *TIME* magazine, ESPN, C-SPAN, NBC, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and so on. Party affiliation has an impact on citizens' perception of news source trustworthiness. Hence, those in favor of the Democratic Party were more likely to trust TV networks PBS, ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN, while Republicans placed their trust in Fox News, the Fox Business Channel, and Newsmax (Orth & Bialik, 2024, para. 10). With respect to the economy or financial news, there were several sources trusted on both sides, including the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, *Business Insider*, and the *Economist*.

Although Fox News belongs to journalism, they "position themselves as outsiders and regularly promote what others categorize as fake news" (McNair, 2017, p. 63). This TV channel remains a trustworthy source to many Republicans, even though its reputation has been undermined multiple times by nonprofessional reporting. The most recent example includes Fox News being accused of promoting false information after the 2020 US presidential elections, claiming that they were rigged and stolen from candidate Donald Trump. Making such accusations resulted in a lawsuit against Fox News filed by Dominion Voting Systems, a company that produces voting machines. The TV channel, however, was reluctant to go to trial. Instead, it settled the legal case with Dominion by paying the voting machinery almost $800 million,

which put a period on "a case that had embarrassed Fox News over several months" (Bauder et al., 2023).

What does this all mean to an average reader, and how should they choose their sources? Regardless of personal perceptions or party affiliation, the sources discussed above are considered legitimate news sources. First, they abide by or at least strive to adhere to the principles of journalism discussed in the previous chapter (e.g., delivering the truth, accuracy, verification of information, independence, and transparency). I use the term "strive to" because nothing is absolute; facts can evolve, and journalists, like anyone else, make errors. Second, the news sources utilized in reports they publish serve as evidence that a reporter or reporters covering the story have performed their usual routine of information collection and verification. It is important to note that although verification is an integral part of journalistic sourcing routines, the online environment with its anonymous sources makes this process challenging (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). In addition to that, even if the sources utilized in a news report are well-known and trustworthy, they can still create problems, which brings us back to the first point. If the people a journalist talks to are wrong about an issue or an event, then the journalist is wrong about the accounts presented in the story. Journalism is truly about people, and it relies on people, tools, and documents they created to deliver the news to us. While this should not serve as a justification for error-making, it should bring awareness that while errors are possible, those who adhere to professional standards will strive to not make them and to deliver truthful accounts of events to the best of their ability. Third, by navigating the source's website, you will find important information regarding the news organization's professional norms and how the organization approaches them. Typically, the "About" section on a news website incorporates the news outlet's mission statement and references to journalism's code of ethics. The *Washington Post*, for instance, has listed on its website seven principles for the conduct of a newspaper, the first one being its obligation "to tell the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained" ("About the Post," 2021, para. 4). Another prominent US-based media outlet, CNN, describes its mission as informing, engaging, and empowering the world through its commitment to seek and report the truth (n.d., para. 3–4).

What if you detect that the reporter did not get all the facts straight, that something simply appears strange in their story? Could you trust that news organization? The reporter should always strive to get all the facts correct, adhering to a practice of information verification in accomplishing this goal. Yet, in today's fast-paced media environment, there is a demand for real-time updates, which can compromise the fact-checking process. Reporters are humans, and mistakes happen, especially when they rush to deliver breaking news as quickly as possible, complying with the audience's expectations to consume information about events instantly. This does not imply that they can easily let the errors occur, but that they should minimize the possibility of errors in their reporting through the process of verification of information. Even though speed and immediacy are important, as noted in the previous chapter, accuracy holds a higher standard in journalism. However, if an error still happens, journalists need to be transparent about it, letting the reader know that what had been previously reported was incorrect and that they now have correct information. The *Guardian*, as one of the most prominent global online platforms and most visited news sites among international consumers, has established the practice of inviting readers to report errors when they see them. This is an excellent example of how readers, in the twenty-first-century news ecosystem, can assist journalists in news delivery. The *Guardian* highlights errors and invites readers to report a mistake or a broken link in case they detect one ("How Can We Help You," n.d.). The *New York Times* does the same, stating that it is their "ethical responsibility to correct all factual errors, large and small, promptly and in a prominent space" ("How Does the New York Times Handle Corrections?" 2022, para. 2). Under its Contact section, the *New York Times* also has a detailed explanation of why and how they handle corrections.

But what if mistakes are intentional? There is a remedy for that as well. Glader (2017) highlighted an important factor, which is looking into how news organizations handle employees who exaggerate or plagiarize information. He stressed that prominent mainstream media, such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, NBC, and the *New Republic*, have fired reporters who have violated journalism principles of ethics. Hence, although journalists may not face legal repercussions like imprisonment or fines if the information in their

story is exaggerated or if they copy and paste paragraphs from other media outlets, they are likely to face professional consequences. Those include being laid off and facing challenges in finding future employment in journalism due to their shattered credibility. Placing a high value on trust and integrity is crucial for media professionals, especially as they strive to reassure news consumers that they can confide in the reports these professionals provide.

Blogs, Citizen Websites, Media, and Community-Driven Platforms

In a digital media environment, content consumption extends beyond mainstream media to include alternative sources of information such as blogs, media platforms, and citizen journalism websites. These platforms illuminate diverse forms of civic engagement and allow writers, with no requirement of background in news media and expectations to adhere to professional journalism norms, to supply a wide audience with facts and opinions. As such, they enrich the contemporary media ecosystem with alternative points of view on politics, societal issues, economics, business, sports, and other topics.

A blog, or a weblog, can be defined as "a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries called posts (including text, images, media objects, and data) arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent entry appears first" (Brownstein & Klein, 2006, p. 18). They can also appear as a web page on both non-media and mainstream media sites. Blogs have become popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kenix, 2009), covering a vast array of topics, from comic books, novels, travel, and beauty to societal issues and politics. This form of writing online should be distinguished from microblogging. While microblogs are short and typically contain only a paragraph, which was the case with the beginning stages of Twitter, where users were limited to tweets of only 140 characters, blogs are longer and present issues in more depth. Both represent personal reflections of the people who wrote them, and they are native to the digital media environment.

Blogs differ from journalistic articles by their informal writing style (Brownstein & Klein, 2006). Oftentimes, they are distinctive for their casual

headlines, conversational tone, presence of hyperlinks, question-posing to elicit engagement, and encouragement of readers' comments, thus creating a sense of community. Writers of blogs usually specialize in a specific topic and offer their opinions on it. As such, blogs can be a valuable source of information for journalists and a good point from which an expert opinion on the topic at hand can be gained (Farrell & Drezner, 2008). They offer an alternative point of view on political and societal issues, and "at their idealized best, blogs have the capability to report news without the constraints of censure or the pressures of advertising" (Kenix, 2009, p. 791). In the blogosphere, bloggers use hyperlinks and link content to other blogs and relevant content to increase readership (Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Kenix, 2009). Although blogs are not as popular as they were in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the practice of cooperation and linking sources is still common among those who still embrace this form of writing and publishing.

Anyone can create a blog by setting up an account on platforms such as Blogger or WordPress. Blogs are also hosted on news media sites such as the Huffington Post and Daily Kos. Therefore, these written pieces native to the web environment can be completely independent, designed by individuals eager to share their experiences and viewpoints, regardless of whether their primary focus is lifestyle or the US presidential elections. Aside from that, blogs can also find their home on mainstream media sites, which implies that bloggers cannot post their blogs automatically, a practice they embrace when using WordPress. Instead, they need to wait for the website host to approve and make their blog publicly available.

Citizen websites, on the other hand, exist completely outside the mainstream media realm. Supplying internet users with news, opinions, and other information, some of the citizen sites might mimic news sites, but they still differ from them in aim, structure, and scope, being rather an alternative than competition to the mainstream and local media outlets. In addition, citizens cannot upload content automatically on this site like they can when posting on platforms such as Medium or their own sites created on Blogger. Citizen sites, similar to blogs, can cover a wide range of topics; yet, they utilize diverse writing formats to illustrate these topics, including hard news and feature stories. This brings them closer to traditional news organizations, with

several major differences to consider. Unlike mainstream media journalists, citizen site writers are not obliged to obey professional journalism norms, and they are not constrained by a journalistic principle of timeliness and neutrality when creating and posting content. Contributors to citizen sites are likely not to be paid for the content they create, as these people are driven primarily by the causes they feel the urge to discuss or their passion for writing. These alternative sources are not dependent on advertising and commercial gain like mainstream outlets. An example of such a digital venture is a site based in the San Francisco Bay Area, IndyBay.org, which labels itself as a "non-commercial, democratic collective of bay area independent media makers and media outlets" ("About Us," 2003, para. 1). The site focuses on supplying the said region of Northern California with information that they are not able to obtain from corporate media, an example being the coverage of local events and issues concerning activism. Another example is Global Voices, a site based in the Netherlands that is, as its name suggests, focused on the issues of a wider scope, global in nature. The list of topics this site covers is quite extensive, including matters such as human rights, digital activism, the environment, arts and culture, freedom of speech, and refugees. Established in 2004, the site also praises itself for providing an alternative viewpoint and being a home for the voices of those people who are not likely to be seen in mainstream media ("What Is Global Voices," n.d.). While these sites can be a good source of information for both citizens and journalists, their content reflects the perspectives of their creators. Specifically, if the article writer is an activist, then it is expected of them to express attitudes and opinions that align with their activism, while journalists are obliged to adhere to their professional norms and refrain from taking sides in a story.

The golden age of blogs and citizen sites occurred during the first decade and part of the second decade of the twenty-first century. While they remained popular in the second decade of this century, social media started taking over, shifting people's habits and attention to sharing and discussing burning issues in society on Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. Then the third decade of the twenty-first century ushered in the popularity of two distinct phenomena—mini publications known as newsletters and writing-focused sites, such as Substack or Medium. An online newsletter is typically delivered

in the form of an email to subscribers, providing relevant content and updates. This digital communication format is usually sent daily, weekly, or as needed, and it can either be focused on a specific subject, such as technology, or span a broad range of topics (Seely & Spillman, 2021). They normally include links to the original platform where the full story is published, which helps drive web traffic. A newsletter feature is also present on the increasingly popular writing platform Substack and its predecessor Medium. Both Substack and Medium allow users to create accounts, publish or read long-form writing pieces, and potentially earn income through content placed behind the paywall or through reader donations. Medium praises itself for being a home for millions of users who enjoy connecting and sharing their knowledge with the world. Its base of 100 million monthly users includes "software developers, amateur novelists, product designers, CEOs, and anyone burning with a story they need to get out into the world" ("Everyone Has a Story to Tell," n.d.). Substack is a platform that accommodates both writers and readers, allowing them to post long-form stories, short updates, videos, photographs, and interact within the community. In addition, Substack enables users to publish podcasts, which is a popular media format similar to radio shows, delivered digitally in audio or video form. A standout feature of Substack is its newsletter delivery system, which sends published content directly to subscribers' inboxes, thus helping writers build a loyal subscriber base and monetize their work.

Finally, internet users can look up information on community-driven platforms such as Reddit, Quora, and Yahoo Answers. They allow users to contribute, collaborate, and exchange information in an informal way. Reddit is a popular online network that grants the creation of diverse communities connected by common interests and passions. Quora and Yahoo Answers represent Q and A platforms as they allow users to post questions or provide answers to other users' questions and upvote them. Wikipedia could also be placed in this group as an online encyclopedia that enables users to create and edit content voluntarily. What is common to all of these platforms is that they are user-generated and rich in information, but just like Medium and Substack, they are not news. People cannot be held accountable for what they post on these community-driven platforms like journalists are, and everything we read there should be taken with a grain of salt. This is because, regardless of

whether we are likely to encounter an accurate portrayal of events and issues there, these platforms are also susceptible to misinformation and false content, as they do not undergo professional scrutiny like journalistic content.

Partisan News and Biased Information

As much as the digital age has made possible the rise of alternative sites that allow coverage of events that are unlikely to be covered by local media or bring to light local issues, it has also amplified the influence of partisan sites. These digital ventures are known for their strong support for a particular party and ideology, making them heavily biased. They host news and analysis that is skewed and create echo chambers in which people consume viewpoints that align with their own, reinforcing them further. Among these are blogs, bulletin boards, and websites representing far-right ideologies or conspiracies. In the United States, some of the known sources representing these extreme viewpoints include Infowars by Alex Jones and The Daily Stormer (Guess & Lyons, 2020; McNair, 2017). They can be recognized by sensationalistic headlines, questionable information, and conspiracies. Infowars is a media platform owned by a radio show host and well-known conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, whose media empire was earning him $80 million annually (Lozano, 2024). The Daily Stormer is a neo-Nazi and white nationalist ideology website whose founder Andrew Anglin is known for his extreme viewpoints and online harassment. Anglin actively advocates white supremacy and spreads harmful opinions, including the dissemination of antisemitic messages and hateful comments against women in which he invites his supporters to use violence against them ("About Andrew Anglin," n.d.). The problem with both Jones and Anglin with respect to digital news literacy is that these dangerous viewpoints and the disinformation they produce have a high viral potential and can mask themselves as real news, especially to those who are susceptible to extreme opinions or lack the knowledge to distinguish between reliable and harmful digital content. Social media platforms such as X or YouTube can further amplify content coming from partisan websites, as usually sensationalistic headlines and igniting messages are likely to generate high engagement in

the form of clicks and shares. No one is immune from biased content and questionable information, but one can protect themselves by engaging in critical thinking, fact-checking, and examining the information thoroughly before disseminating it further. There are not many things as pleasing as seeing quotes and sentences that align with our assumptions and beliefs. Still, to make decisions that are best for us, it is crucial that we reflect on our biases and approach the content we see online with rigor.

Reflecting on the key points explored in this chapter, it is evident that the digital media environment has expanded the range of platforms and sources through which we can access, produce, and further disseminate content. This technological revolution has transformed our news consumption habits, broadening existing news sources with an extensive list of alternative ones. In this chapter, you have been introduced to both types of sources. News media sources are those expected to adhere to professional journalism norms when producing content, ensuring that they supply readers with trustworthy, accurate, verified, and balanced stories and portrayals of events. They can take the form of news agencies (e.g., Reuters, AFP), newspapers (e.g., *Chicago Tribune*, the *Seattle Times*), broadcasts (NBC, NPR), and other media that exist both in their traditional and online formats (the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, CNN). These are all reputable sources of information, recognizable by the news articles they publish in which they utilize diverse sources, from formal (e.g., governments, corporate representatives) to informal (e.g., citizens affected by the issue discussed in the story).

Due to the decline in public trust in journalism, many Americans are turning their backs on mainstream media and looking at independent sites, podcasts, and social media platforms to acquire information and opinions. Clearly, independent news creators are occupying more and more space in the digital media ecology. Social media and podcasts are thriving. Content derived from Substack and citizen sites could serve as an invaluable source for both citizens and journalists and expand our knowledge and understanding of the world. Yet, unlike journalism pieces, stories and posts produced by non-journalists are not expected to be balanced and neutral, and as such, they should be assessed with an awareness of biases. In addition to that, one should also be cautious of partisan websites, especially those promoting conspiracies.

While some of the independently crafted stories, such as those produced on alternative news sites that cover local issues that lack coverage by mainstream media, can supply readers with invaluable information, others can use the power of the internet to spread hateful comments and ignite violence. Digital news literacy is the key to being able to make a distinction between these two types of platforms and select information that will inform your decision-making process, not jeopardize it. In the next chapter, we will further the skills of navigating diverse sources online by going beyond reliable sources of information and looking at those malicious in nature, understanding how to detect and discard them.

Note

1 First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

3

False and Misleading Digital Content

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

People across the globe increasingly rely on social media to obtain their daily dose of news. Considering that there are no professional ethics like those in journalism or regulations requiring users on these platforms to post only facts, consumers are exposed not only to real news but also to a flood of misinformation, trolling, and fake content. When no standards exist in ensuring that users post only fact-supported information, deceptive messages or unintentional errors can easily go viral, often blurring the lines between facts and fiction. Developing digital news literacy and, thus, understanding how to distinguish between the content produced by relevant vs. questionable sources is a necessity in battling misleading digital content that can easily be spread on the internet. By honing the skills that help an individual critically evaluate news sources, they can identify trustworthy information, recognize potential biases, and detect signs of manipulation that come from those interested in provoking reactions and creating divisions within communities.

When discussing false content online, four key terms that often come up include misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news. Each of them reflects unique aspects of how and why false information is created and disseminated. Although all these terms share a common trait, which is carrying information that is inaccurate, there are subtle differences among them. In this group of concepts representing misleading content, misinformation is the least harmful in terms of its origins. It is false information that is shared unintentionally without the disseminator's awareness of its inaccuracy (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022).

Misinformation constitutes "a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts" (Guess & Lyons, 2020, p. 10). People who share misinformation typically believe the content in question to be real, and they disseminate it further with good intentions, either to draw attention to an issue they find relevant or to express concern. Regardless of the lack of malicious intent, misinformation still has the potential to cause harm, as it can result in confusion and reinforcement of false beliefs.

An example of misinformation is illustrated in an event in 2024, in which social media users redistributed videos that called on women to stop using hormonal contraception such as birth control pills, claiming they were not safe. Believing in this false information and behaving accordingly has created a list of problems. Michael Belmonte, an OB/GYN and a family planning expert with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, has warned that "women frequently come in for abortions after believing what they see on social media about the dangers of hormonal birth control and the effectiveness of tracking periods to prevent pregnancy" (Weber & Malhi, 2024, para. 7). Planned Parenthood, an organization dedicated to assisting women in their sexual and reproductive health and wellness care, has stressed that hormonal birth control is highly safe and that, although side effects might occur, there is no "definitive research that suggests hormonal birth control causes weight gain or depression," which was the false information circulating on social media ("The Quickie: Birth Control Misinformation Is on the Rise," 2024, para. 5). Therefore, although this misinformation was not created with an intent to harm other people, it still had the capacity to create damage, making women avoid hormonal contraception, which could have resulted in unwanted pregnancies.

Another example that shows the detrimental impact of misinformation on public health is illustrated in nonvalid claims that vaccines cause autism. This misinformation has turned into an ever-present myth that has sparked concerns among parents across the globe, despite overwhelming scientific evidence that disproves such claims. This is particularly the case with the vaccine for mumps, measles, and rubella, or MMR, that children receive when they are 12 to 18 months old. According to Davidson (2017), signs of autism are noticeable at this age, yet people are likely to accept that autism occurred

after the child received the shot because it "fits the cognitive bias to search for patterns and is much more comforting than the notion of coincidence or bad luck" (p. 404). While they are aware of what autism looks like and are afraid of it, this author suggests, the idea of measles and rubella is abstract, making it difficult for parents to understand the MMR's long-term benefits. Davidson (2017) has also warned that myths about vaccines are being shaped by a set of factors, from political to religious, and that scientific knowledge is susceptible to misinterpretations, which has caused a reduction in vaccination. He stressed that even though there is a decrease in parents who opt for MMR vaccines, there is an increase in autism, which further debunks the myth that children automatically become autistic after getting jabbed.

While in the case of misinformation people tend to share false content not knowing that it is inaccurate, in the case of disinformation, a person posting falsity knows that the information is not correct, so they share it deliberately (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Hence, the evident distinction is reflected in the intent—while the former is inadvertent, the latter is disseminated to deceive (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022). Disinformation is not a new term, as we have seen the spread of it throughout history, even from official sources. One such example is the Pentagon Papers revelations, a moment in US history that exposed the government for creating a false picture in the public about the Vietnam War. Secretary of Defense at the time Robert S. McNamara was continuously and knowingly misinforming the public about the US involvement in Vietnam. At one instance, he claimed that the US combat troops had been making progress in South Vietnam, saying that "in the past four and one-half years, the Vietcong, the Communists, have lost 89,000 men" (Becker, 2021, para. 2). The document titled "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force," widely known as the Pentagon Papers and commissioned by McNamara in 1967, suggested otherwise ("Pentagon Papers," n.d.). It was not until four years later, and the moment the documents were leaked to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst, that it was revealed that "the United States got itself mired in a long, costly war in a small Southeast Asian country of questionable strategic importance" (Becker, 2021, para. 8). The involvement in the war was far from limited, as the public was told. Before the breaking revelation by the *New York*

Times, the media were spreading official information from the government, which they believed was valid, only to later learn that they were spreading disinformation unknowingly.

While disinformation is simply false, malinformation has a foothold in reality, yet it is equipped with malicious intent. Specifically, a sender is aware that they will harm another person if they leak such information (Lim, 2023). This harm can be caused "either by moving private information into the public arena or using people's affiliations, like their religion, against them" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 27). One such example is when multiple celebrity gossip websites posted explicit photographs of a famous actress, Scarlett Johansson, making them available to a wider public (Sinha-Roy, 2011). Accordingly, Johansson was a victim of leaked photos from her phone on the internet that were evidently distributed without her permission. Another example is reflected in the French elections in 2017, when the leading French presidential candidate, the pro-European Union centrist Emmanuel Macron, had his emails leaked less than two days before the final round of the presidential election (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Macron's campaign team explained that the documents released just four hours before the campaign officially closed, creating restrictions for the candidates to communicate with the public via mass media and organize promo activities, represented a mix of false and authentic files designed to confuse voters and undermine Macron (Almasy, 2017). Regardless of this release of private information ahead of the elections, Macron defeated the French far-right leader Marine Le Pen by winning 66 percent of votes (Chrisafis, 2017).

Fake News

In the ecology of questionable content, fake news has emerged as one of the most troubling phenomena in the past decade. McNair (2017) defined fake news as "deliberate fabrications targeted at the most popular media, intended to influence public opinion for or against particular political actors" (p. 30). Fake news might mimic real news, but its content lacks the accuracy, objectivity, and independence that news produced by credible media sources

strives to achieve (Baym, 2009). Disinformation and fake news are terms that are frequently used interchangeably in scholarly literature because they both have the intention to mislead audiences. In this book, I will attempt to make a distinction between the two. First, let's look at how the Cambridge Dictionary defines this phenomenon. According to this source, fake news represents "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political news or as a joke" ("Fake News," n.d., para. 1). Drawing upon this definition, I would describe fake news as the type of content designed to mislead that mimics real media content by using text and multimedia as a form of manipulation (e.g., photos, videos, graphs). Hence, fake news is a type of disinformation. However, while disinformation can come in any form, fake news' deceptive nature is disguised in its ability to impersonate real news with attributes such as headlines, utilizations of made-up quotes and sources, or videos featuring high-profile individuals while delivering statements that are untrue. The aim of fake news is to attract people to click on its content with sensationalistic headlines, which then helps the content creator generate advertising revenue (McNair, 2017). The consequences of fake news, as Bakir and McStay (2018) duly noted, are "wrongly informed citizens" who "are likely to stay wrongly informed in echo chambers" where ideas and beliefs are reinforced, and they would be "outraged given the affective and provocative nature of much fake news" (p. 159). According to these two authors, algorithms create further problems as they allow "filter bubbles" to form by exposing users to selective content that aligns with their activities online, including browsing and search history.

In fact, fake news is frequently being discussed in the context of filtering algorithms. These computer programs are shaping news consumption habits and people's perceptions of the world. Originally designed to enhance user experience and maintain engagement on social media, algorithms select content based on users' activities and interactions (Berman & Katona, 2020). In this context, algorithms function as computer programs that select information that will be presented to users, such as what appears in news feeds or search engine results. Google News algorithms, for instance, derive information about users through a database that collects information based on users' browsing and activities on Google applications. Facebook algorithms determine which

content to show to users on their feed based on the source that published a post, the time when it was posted, and the prediction of the user's engagement with the said post ("How Facebook Distributes Content," n.d.). At its core, algorithms learn about users' behavior and predict what content they might be interested in. While this results in exposure to a vast array of information, the content is frequently filtered to align with users' preferred choices, thus limiting their knowledge and distancing them from opposing viewpoints. Hence, an individual may fail to see information that challenges their beliefs, values, and opinions. This lack of exposure to a diversity of information can also contribute to ideological polarization.

Not all algorithms are created equal, though. Berman and Katona (2020) emphasized that scholarly research that explored algorithms produced mixed evidence on their impact on online polarization. These scholars distinguished between two types of polarization: exogenous polarization, which arises from people's content preferences that align with their tastes, and increased polarization, which is the consequence of filtering algorithms. They explained that the former "increases connectivity, which may lead to potentially more diverse content being consumed," while the latter creates filter bubbles (p. 303). Another scholar, Peter Dahlgren (2021), provided a critical review of filter bubbles, questioning their real impact on people's perceptions of the world. He suggested that information consumption is by default a selective process and that people tend to seek information that is congruent with their beliefs, given the overwhelming abundance of knowledge and content available to them. However, Dahlgren (2021) emphasized that this selectivity does not imply a complete avoidance of conflicting information, as research shows that people also look at what the opposing side is sharing, sometimes out of a desire to monitor the other side of the ideological and political spectrum. In addition, this scholar added that selective exposure itself, especially on social media, does not necessarily prevent people from engaging with information coming from other users with differing viewpoints.

One of the issues with filter bubbles is that they can contribute to the spread of fake news, as people are more likely to further share information they receive from those they regularly interact with, believing that it is true and not necessarily verifying its accuracy. To break away from a filter bubble, the

BBC has proposed three key steps. They include beating the algorithms by interacting with content one disagrees with; expanding the selection of sources online, particularly by seeking out trustworthy outlets that lie outside of one's individual media spectrum; and going offline to discuss ideas with friends and family in order to seek diverse opinions ("How Algorithms and Filter Bubbles Decide What We See on Social Media," n.d.).

While these strategies aim to counteract the effects of algorithm-driven filter bubbles, the problem of fake news remains one of the greatest challenges of the broader media environment. Baym (2009) stressed that "unlike most forms of journalism, the fake news has no obligation to follow the news cycle—that daily attention focused on a small number of events and issues—sometimes significant, sometimes trivial—that move rapidly in and out of journalistic focus" (p. 377). Fake news can incorporate false information about current events, but it can also look as if it popped up out of nowhere to make us think about issues that are not in the news. It also covers a wide range of topics and does not focus only on politics, although that appears to be an area susceptible to false information. For instance, a website called Associated Media Coverage published a story titled "Idaho Mother Sentenced to Prison for Breastfeeding in Public," claiming that a nursing mother was arrested for feeding her baby in front of others. The site, known for hoaxes, also published a photograph of an unknown woman who was allegedly from Baker County, suggesting she was the one sentenced to seven years in prison. There were several important cues that implied that the story was false, including that Associated Media Coverage had previously reported hoax stories, as well as that Baker County is not in Idaho, and that the phone number listed in the article inviting readers to contact the county's local authorities is the number of a church in Kansas (Evon, 2016). Although it was evident that the story was false, it did not prevent internet users from disseminating it online, believing that it was true.

Fake news should be distinguished from propaganda, another mass media tool driven by malicious intent. Propaganda is reflected in "news stories which are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions," and although it is "often based on facts," this form of manipulation "includes bias that promotes a particular side or perspective" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 146–7). In other words, propaganda's key goal is to influence people, and it could involve

spreading diverse types of information, including real, exaggerated, and false, with the goal of manipulating emotions and shaping public opinion, directing it toward a certain political idea or belief. It is present in a wide range of media coverage, from national elections to public health. Propaganda's dangerous nature is reflected in numerous historical instances, including the machinery employed by the Nazis before and during the Second World War, creating stereotypes against the Jewish population in Europe and convincing Germans to accept their ideology and political goals that resulted in the Holocaust.

In today's media environment, propaganda remains a powerful tool in controlling the masses, and due to its easy reach and fast delivery of messages, it can affect more people than ever before. Authoritarian regimes are particularly inclined to employ mass media over which they have control to disseminate content that illuminates their political aims and official ideology. Zhu and Fu (2024), for instance, noticed that in China, although digital media has empowered alternative forms of journalism, it has also provided more tools to state media and the regime to gain popularity among the masses. This suggests that propaganda remains relevant even when people are exposed to a diversity of sources. What has changed are the tools and approaches to it, as propagandists do not incorporate their messages only into hard news or political stories but also into soft content such as articles on pop culture, music videos, games, and other popular forms of entertainment. Zhu and Fu (2024) suggested that the communist regime in China and its media have embraced infotainment, which is a form of tabloid journalism that combines information and entertainment. This soft content reflected in infotainment is cheap to produce, yet it is built on form, not substance (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021) serving as a perfect tool for authoritarian governments that use propaganda to manipulate the masses.

Propaganda is not the only concept that is frequently associated with fake news. Satire and parody also get mixed up with fake news oftentimes, even though they represent different things. In fact, after examining thirty-four scholarly studies, Tandoc et al. (2018) detected that diverse media artifacts and formats have been used in connection with the term "fake news," including news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. References to fake news, among them politicians' tendency to

describe the content they dislike as fake, further contribute to the confusion of what this term really means. McNair (2017) stressed that fake news is neither the news that others dislike, nor are they satirical TV shows or conspiracy theories. For instance, *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert, *The Tonight Show* starring Jimmy Fallon, or *Late Night* with Seth Meyers all present content derived from the news, but they are not fake news. What these shows portray is a form of satirical comedy that falls in the domain of entertainment. Formats presented in these shows look like journalistic content; however, they represent satire, a reflection on current events with humor (McNair, 2017). While fake news looks like real news, with the difference being that it represents false content, satirical TV shows mimic the traditional news broadcast, where there is a host sitting at the desk and talking about current events. Unlike TV broadcasts, formats like *The Daily Show* do not deliver reports on current events but rather a humorous reflection on them in a studio with a live audience.

Given the description above, a reader may wonder why it is that satirical TV shows are widely accepted and even broadcast on TV networks with their exaggerations and divergence from reality, while fake news is considered malicious and perceived in a negative light. How come satire gets celebrated even with its distorted depiction of reality, while fake news is condemned for doing basically the same thing? The key difference could be ascribed to the intent of both. What makes satirical shows distinctive is that "they promote themselves as delivering entertainment first and foremost rather than information, with hosts calling themselves comedians or entertainers, instead of journalists or newscasters" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 141). Unlike fake news sites, they are straightforward about the type of content they deliver, which is designed to make audiences laugh. Fake news does not tell us that it is designed with an attempt to mislead and lie to us but rather presents itself as truthful news, which it is not. Therefore, while satire aims to entertain and provoke, fake news has a goal to manipulate and deceive for personal gain.

A format similar to news satire is news parody. The difference between the two is that parodies do not provide satirical commentary but create fictitious news stories using certain elements from reality and highlighting them (Tandoc et al., 2018). An example of a parody website is *The Onion*, which

originally started as a newspaper and now has a digital platform on which it publishes humorous content. Their stories are made up, but the basis of the stories is somewhat related to real-life events. For instance, before the start of the Olympics in Paris and inspired by other media stories published in relation to the athletes' preparations for the games in Paris, *The Onion* posted a story stating, "In an effort to crack down on rampant sexual activity in the Olympic Village, the International Olympic Committee has outfitted beds for the 2024 Summer Games with athletes' grandparents, sources confirmed Tuesday" ("Olympic Anti-Sex Beds Outfitted with Athletes' Grandparents," 2024, para. 1). Clearly, the story was not real, but rather a deliberate exaggeration. If you open the site's "About" page, you will not see any disclaimer that it is a parody website. However, aside from being known globally as a parody medium, going over the "About us" page will signal to the reader that the content is humorous and should not be taken seriously. For instance, the page reads, "rising from its humble beginnings as a print newspaper in 1756, *The Onion* now enjoys a daily readership of 4.3 trillion and has grown into the single most powerful and influential organization in human history" ("About Us," n.d., para. 1). To draw a line between parody and news that is fabricated, Tandoc et al. (2018) suggested that in the case of the latter, there is an absence of "the implicit agreement between the author and the consumer that it is false" (p. 144).

While *The Onion* is a well-known satirical source, there are many others that have emerged, spreading satirical information or parody that, without diligent fact-checking, could easily be perceived by users as real stories that they might further disseminate. One of the most notable examples happened during the 2016 presidential elections, when a source, WTOE 5 News, published a story titled, "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement." Now, let's take a moment to analyze this article. Looking at the headline, "shocks world," alone should be sufficient to raise suspicion of whether the story is true. The word "shock" is typically used for clickbait, as its aim is to attract readers' attention by creating a sense of urgency. A person with strong digital news literacy skills is likely to think that the news story creator just wanted to trick them into reading the story that is evidently either fake or sensationalized. At the same time, it could be difficult for an individual with no substantive knowledge about media sources to determine

the story's validity because there are various tabloid newspapers and online news sites that use multiple language techniques to attract readers and make the news sensationalistic, among which the word "shock" has a prominent place. Therefore, the word "shock" appears somewhat normal to them. The reader lacking digital news literacy skills might thus accept the story, believing that it is yet another article coming from tabloid news media sources. In case they disregard the word "shock" used in the headline, digitally literate readers will still find several other cues that imply the story is false. By accessing the story, the literate reader will notice that the website that published it looks a bit messy for a legit news site and that the story in question has no date or the name of the person who wrote it. The pope's alleged statement also sounds strange: "I have been hesitant to offer any kind of support for either candidate in the US presidential election, but I now feel that to not voice my concern would be a dereliction of my duty as the Holy See" ("Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement," n.d.). For one, we should at least expect a bit more sophisticated message from the Vatican. In addition, anyone watching and reading news at that time would find themselves astonished by such information, considering that Pope Francis had some clear reservations about Trump, criticizing him for building a wall along the US border with Mexico (Schaedel, 2016). The last, but not the least important component of the analysis is going beyond the story itself and looking into the About page of WTOE. This is where readers will learn that the site does not supply audiences with real event information. The site staff clearly states that "WTOE 5 News is a fantasy news website" and that "most articles on wtoe5news.com are satire or pure fantasy" ("About Us," n.d., para. 4). Regardless, this parody story has found its way to social media, where it was shared widely as real news.

Conspiracy Theories

In tandem with fake news is another form of disinformation: conspiracy theories. Keeley (1999) defined a conspiracy theory as "a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency

of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret" (p. 116). This definition suggests that at the core of every conspiracy is a secret scenario related to a specific issue designed by a small group of people. The usual goal of conspiracies is to "usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions" (Douglas et al., 2019). Although conspiracy is frequently tied to the notion of power, according to Keeley (1999), not all conspirators are powerful; they just have a role in creating the conspiracy event.

Conspiracies have fueled the spread of prejudice, incited terrorist attacks, contributed to acts of genocide, cultivated reluctance to accept scientific evidence, and caused many other harmful consequences (Douglas et al., 2019). One of the widely known conspiracies that demonstrate the kind of danger made-up, malicious stories can pose to society is the pizzagate conspiracy. This conspiracy was established in 2016, during the presidential campaign, claiming that several high-ranking Democratic Party candidates, among whom was the party's presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, ran a child sex trafficking ring from a pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington, D.C. (Nuckols, 2016). For one man, the bizarre rumor was an invitation to take a matter into his own hands. Edgar Maddison Welch came to D.C. from North Carolina in December 2016 carrying three loaded firearms and ammunition and entered the restaurant, believing that child slaves were inside it. According to a press release issued by the United States Attorney's Office (2017), he was sentenced to four years in prison because of the "incident in which he carried a loaded AR-15 assault rifle and a revolver into a Northwest Washington pizza restaurant, scattering employees and customers, and fired his assault rifle into a door" (para. 1). The press release detailed how his entry into the restaurant scared employees and customers, prompting them to flee the building. Welch stayed inside for 20 minutes, shooting at the door of a locked restaurant room and walking around, determined to find alleged child slaves who were never present at that place. Luckily, no one was injured in this incident. Even though it was clear that pizzagate was a conspiracy and that the rumors surrounding it were false, it was still insufficient for many firm believers in this conspiracy to accept that the information that brought Welch to the restaurant, frightening restaurant workers and guests, was false. A conspiracy theorist, James Fetzer,

argued that this was actually the evidence that the conspiracy was true, telling the Associated Press that "Welch's visit to the pizzeria was staged to distract the public from the truth of the 'pizzagate' allegations" (Nuckols, 2016, para. 6).

If you were not aware of the pizzagate conspiracy until today, perhaps you are familiar with the conspiracy that the coronavirus pandemic was a biological attack that came from China. According to believers in these unfounded claims, Covid-19, the virus that had not been identified in humans until 2019, was intentionally engineered as a bioweapon at the Wuhan Virology Lab in the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China. Did you also know that this was not the first time that an issue of public health concern has turned into a conspiracy theory? For instance, during the Cold War, which divided the world into the Western Bloc led by the United States and the Eastern Bloc led by the Soviet Union, a conspiracy about the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was circulating the media, blaming the United States for the alleged invention of this virus at the Army's Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland, as a form of biological weapon in warfare (Corera, 2017; Selvage & Nehring, 2019). The US authorities held accountable the Soviet Union and its secret service for spreading this disinformation, claiming that they did it with the aim to create tensions and distrust within the country as well as between the United States and its international allies (Corera, 2017; "The Kremlin's Never-Ending Attempt to Spread Disinformation," 2023). Later, it was discovered that this disinformation was manufactured by the Soviets and their Committee for State Security, or KGB. The truth revealed itself in a telegram sent in 1985 by the KGB to their Bulgarian foreign intelligence partners, in which the secret service stated that it was taking measures to spread the story of how the virus was developed by the US military and secret service as a biological weapon. In the telegram, the KGB also suggested that disseminating this information contributed to a favorable image of the Soviets and their allies in the world (Selvage & Nehring, 2019). The original story was, in fact, published in a paper in India, warning that acquired immunodeficiency syndrome might affect the population of that South Asian country (Corera, 2017). Only a year later, the conspiracy went one step further. East Germany, which was part of the Eastern Bloc, joined the Soviets in this disinformation campaign by producing research that would bolster the claim that HIV did not

originate in Africa but in the United States as part of research about biological weapons. With the fake study produced by two German biologists, a married couple, Jakob and Lilli Segal, the news about HIV spread further and attracted a lot of attention, especially in Africa. This disinformation campaign had become known as Operation "Denver" by the code name used by the secret police of East Germany, Statsi (Selvage & Nehring, 2019). Although debunked years later, this conspiracy was successfully implanted and implemented at the time (Corera, 2017).

Clearly, similar to the case of AIDS that "seemed to emerge from nowhere" as a virus for which "there was no cure and its origins were a mystery" (Corera, 2017, para. 1–2), Covid-19 started spreading practically overnight, making the entire world perplexed about its genesis and the danger it posed to both humans and animals. This sudden emergence and lack of available scientific knowledge on the virus made the pandemic susceptible to conspiracies. In January 2020, after the first laboratory-confirmed case was reported in the United States by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the *Washington Times*, a D.C.-based American conservative daily newspaper, published a piece in which it speculated on China's accountability in the coronavirus pandemic. In the article titled "Coronavirus Link to China Biowarfare Program Possible, Analyst Say," Dany Shoham, a former Israeli military intelligence officer who holds a PhD in medical microbiology, told the paper that the Wuhan Institute of Virology is part of China's secret biological weapon development program, an allegation that Chinese authorities have persistently refuted. According to him, "Certain laboratories in the institute have probably been engaged, in terms of research and development, in Chinese [biological weapons], at least collaterally, yet not as a principal facility of the Chinese BW alignment" (Gertz, 2020, para. 5). Multiple media organizations have followed up with their reports, citing researchers who have rejected this claim. The *Washington Times* itself updated the article two months later with an editor's note, stating that scientists outside of China have studied the virus and concluded that there were no signs of the virus being intentionally created in a lab, but that experts were still debating that I may have potentially leaked from a lab in China that studied the virus (Gertz, 2020, para. 1). The story was debunked, confirming that there was no credible evidence to support it. Regardless, a significant

number of people continue to believe that the coronavirus was intentionally engineered in China. Conspiracies have contributed to the persistence of this belief, even in the face of expert claims and evidence.

One of the reasons people accept conspiracies is because they allow them to "feel that they are in possession of rare, important information that other people do not have, making them feel special and thus boosting their self-esteem" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 9). Interestingly, being confronted with information that challenges their beliefs can make them embrace conspiracies and fake news even more strongly (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). As the pizzagate example shows, there were firm believers that North Carolina's man's entry into the pizzeria was not real but staged to draw attention away from the alleged child sex trafficking ring. This tendency for people to cling to their initial beliefs when confronted with reality is essential to consider when attempting to explain the falsity of a story and correct such false information. Lewandowsky et al. (2017) believe that the effectiveness of corrections of misinformation depends on two things: "they must not directly challenge people's worldviews"; and they "must explain why the misinformation is disseminated in the first place or they must provide an alternative explanation of the relevant event" (p. 355). It is evident why both approaches can present challenges. The first approach requires a very subtle explanation that what a person thought was accurate is the opposite. The second one mandates effective communication techniques and knowledge of the issue at hand. Is it possible to always uncover real motivations that hide behind the distribution of inaccurate information? Considering that there is a lack of research where participants are those who create hoaxes and other falsehoods, this is likely to be a strenuous task. While we might think that the producer of false information wanted to make people believe in a political rumor or the view that opposes real science, the truth might be that the producer simply wanted to entertain themselves, testing what people are willing to believe, not understanding the amount of harm such an act could cause. Hence, it happens that even humorous intent can have a detrimental effect if people decide to hold onto their initial beliefs and act accordingly.

The problem with fake news and other forms of false information is amplified when it is supported by prominent individuals and mainstream organizations.

A striking example of the impact that public figures, including top politicians, can have on society's acceptance of unsubstantiated claims that originate on the internet is an allegation that Haitian immigrants in Ohio eat cats and dogs. This instantly refuted story started with a post published in a Springfield Facebook group in which a user warned others in this online community of a rumor she heard from her neighbor. According to the post, the neighbor's daughter's friend lost a cat, after which she saw the same animal being butchered by Haitian immigrants in this Ohio town (Kasprak, 2024). This questionable third-hand account posted on Facebook went further to accuse Haitians of eating not only cats but also people's dogs and the local park's ducks and geese, which caused unsurprisingly wide attention and dissemination of this assertion on multiple online platforms. Finally, the bizarre story became viral when an account on X, "End Wokeness" with more than 3 million followers, elaborated on the rumor on this platform, presenting it as a fact (Kasprak, 2024). Following this, the claim about pet-eating in Ohio was supported by right-wing influencers and top Republican politicians. First, JD Vance, a Republican vice-presidential candidate from this Midwestern state, expressed his frustration over the Haitian immigrants in a post on platform X. The post reads, "Months ago, I raised the issue of Haitian illegal immigrants draining social services and generally causing chaos all over Springfield, Ohio. Reports now show that people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn't be in this country. Where is our border czar?" (JD Vance, 2024). With this tweet, the story's audience further widened, yet it was not until a day later that it reached global popularity when the Republican candidate Donald Trump, in a presidential debate with his opponent at the time, Vice President Kamala Harris, accused Haitians of eating people's pets. Answering a question about immigration in the debate on ABC television watched by more than 67 million Americans ("Over 67 Million Viewers Tune In," 2024), Trump said, "They're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there, and this is what's happening in our country, and it's a shame" (Arkin & Ingram, 2024, para. 2).

Mainstream media, fact-checking websites, and local authorities in Ohio have all debunked the story. The woman who initially posted a rumor on Facebook deleted it and regretted posting it in the first place, understanding

that she had shared unverified information, for which she was not able to acquire any evidence even after it caused global attention (Williams, 2024). In addition to that, the truth revealed itself in a journalistic investigation of the allegation. The news media have reported on another woman who was arrested for animal cruelty, which involved murdering and eating a cat. However, it was stated that the sad woman lived in Canton, Ohio, not Springfield, and she was not Haitian but local (Kasprak, 2024; Williams, 2024). Regardless of the evidence presented to the public, after being shared on social media and further supported by top politicians, the unfounded claim was unstoppable. The damage had already been done, as evidenced by the quote of a local man in Springfield published in the *New York Times*: "I know it's true—there were all kinds of cats in my neighborhood a few months ago, and now there are none" (Williams, 2024, para. 14). Subsequently, the rumor itself was sufficient to reach a wide audience and make people believe in it, leading to misunderstandings and stereotypes about Haitians, which made them feel unsafe in the country to which they immigrated.

Scholars who have studied fake news and conspiracies have ascribed the production and distribution of such content primarily to ideological and money-related motivations. For instance, McNair (2017) suggested that the rise of fake news could be attributed to three factors: political weaponizations, where fake news is used against political opponents and opposing ideas; clickbait or elicitation based on clicks in order to generate advertising revenues; and malicious intent, "when computer geeks and hackers knowingly put online fictitious stories for the satisfaction of having them taken seriously" (p. 91). Similar to that, Tandoc et al. (2018) noted that financial and ideological motivations lie behind the production of fake news, as those who create this type of material aim mainly to get clicks or support for their ideas. As a political weapon, fake news is particularly used in the context of elections to undermine political opponents and their ideas. Misleading images, fabricated stories, and videos taken out of context are just some examples of tactics used to erode trust in political rivals and sway undecided voters. The pizzagate conspiracy, along with the example of a false claim that Haitians are eating people's pets in Ohio, depict such political weaponization. During the presidential campaign in 2024, Trump was raising questions about immigration, accusing his

opponents from the Democratic Party of allowing flows of illegal immigrants and criminals into the country. Even though Haitians were legally in the United States (Kasprak, 2024) and they did not commit any of the animal cruelty that they were accused of, they were directly targeted in the political debate about immigration. In fact, the *New York Times* suggested that Trump "repeated the rumor" previously posted on social media and by JD Vance, "using it to drag Springfield into the national debate over immigration" (Williams, 2024, para. 8).

Political motivations and clickbait that drive traffic to a website are dominant, but not the only driving forces that prompt individuals to produce and disseminate false content. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) pointed at social and psychological motivating factors that are embedded in people's intention to connect with certain groups, whether virtually or in the real world, seek prestige, or entertain themselves (p. 26). Hence, they distribute such content to achieve these goals. As McNair (2017) noted, there might be malicious intent behind false content that people create to entertain themselves by fooling others. On the other hand, there are social media users who do not necessarily have malicious intent; they simply use these platforms casually without taking them seriously and post rumors or jokes for fun. Still, that is not a guarantee that other users will not take them seriously and reshare their posts as if they were real.

Strategies to Fight False Information

Misinformation and disinformation do not represent a western but a global phenomenon, and the platforms through which they get disseminated do not include only social media such as X and Facebook but also messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Guess & Lyons, 2020). In fact, opportunities to create and disseminate content that is false and harmful are endless, prompting Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) to use the term "information pollution" to describe the current information environment. They suggest that not only is this pollution hurting democracies globally, but it is also creating tensions and increasing sociocultural divisions.

But how do we fight misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation? Patterson et al. (2019) created a checklist to help readers verify information and images they find online. In summary, these steps include (1) looking up sources before posting; (2) inspecting the source URL and "About" page; (3) analyzing the headline; (4) checking if there is an "enemy" that the story attacks; (5) checking the story date and the author of the story; (6) asking yourself if the story is supported (i.e., inspect quotes, sources, and links); and (7) checking if trustworthy sources have reported the story (p. 173–4). Patterson et al. (2019) also suggested using what I would call common sense, advising users to think if the story looks like a joke or if it is too good to be true before they determine how to react to it.

Starting by looking at who has posted or published the story is the first step in the process. Does the source look familiar to you, or are you seeing it for the first time? What is the name of the source? Does it appear strange? After giving yourself answers to these questions, look at the source URL. There are diverse domain suffixes that websites use. Gov.com refers to a government website; .com suggests the site is commercial; .org is used by organizations; .edu represents educational institutions; and so on. Among the key issues here is that anyone can buy a domain name and choose a suffix freely. Furthermore, there are sites that have created URLs by mimicking real news sites, which is why extra caution is required. Some examples of such URLs include abcnews.com.co, NBC.com.co, or mcrosoftsite.com. And while these sites might appear fairly easy to label as suspicious, others could be more subtle, disguising themselves as real sources and thus more challenging to deal with. One such example is the site unitedmediapublishing.com. You might not be aware of this, but there is, in fact, a legit media company called United Media. Its URL is https://unitedmedia.net/ and this company has a strong presence in Southeastern Europe, supplying consumers with news, entertainment, and sports stories. However, United Media Publishing is a site that has questionable content. A well-known fact-checking platform, Snopes.com, has flagged several stories from unitedmediapublishing.com as fake, describing the site as entertainment-focused but with no disclaimer that its content is fictitious. An illustration is a story published in 2015, which claims that the US president at the time, Barack Obama ordered a $2,350 rebate for all Americans who filed

taxes the year before (LaCapria, 2015). The story was not true, yet it is easy to see why such a claim would be appealing to the American audience and why it would prompt people to click on it to learn more. Who does not want free money?

As URL links could be tricky, it is important to inspect them in combination with other methods, including looking into the "About" page of the site that has published the story that appears strange to you. From this page, it should be clear who is behind the content published on the website and what the purpose of the site is. For instance, if you go to BBC.com and click on the "About the BBC" page of this site, you will find the information that this media is a public service broadcaster serving global audiences. The page reads, "We're impartial and independent, and every day we create distinctive, world-class programmes and content which inform, educate and entertain millions of people in the UK and around the world" ("About the BBC," n.d., para. 1). On the other hand, with fake news sites, such descriptions are rather vague, or they do not have the "About" page at all. The previously mentioned United Media Publishing website, for instance, has four sections, among which is one titled "Contact" that contains no email address or a telephone number that can be used to get in touch with this organization, but only a contact form. Aside from the content that mimics real news stories, there is not any other information regarding who is behind the site. Furthermore, when clicking on the site, a reader can detect another red flag, which is a "not secure" message in the URL, meaning that the connection to the site in question is not secure.

Looking into the headlines, some might appear quite effortless to label as suspicious, including the one previously discussed in this chapter, in which Pope Francis "shocks the world." As noted, what can be confusing to the reader is that many tabloid-like sites use sensationalistic headlines such as that one to attract readers. Although they publish stories that follow certain journalistic standards, facts in those stories are usually blown out of proportion. Such an example is an article with a sensationalized title, "OH JOE Moment Joe Biden wobbles and stumbles on sandy beach as Jill struggles to keep him up during day out in Delaware," published by the British tabloid the *Sun* on November 11, 2024. In the images that accompany the article, it is evident that the US president struggled to walk on the sand. However, the issue is that the story

was framed in a way to show how Biden was struggling due to his physical decline, disregarding the fact that sand is not the smoothest surface to walk on. Although Biden's stroll on the beach is hardly newsworthy, the *Sun* found it interesting enough to publish a story of more than 500 words on the said moment. An otherwise irrelevant event was blown out of proportion to draw the reader's attention.

Another element to examine when assessing an article that seems questionable is if anyone, a person or an organization, is being attacked by the article writer. Lecheler and Egelhofer (2022) suggest that disinformation and fake news are used to discredit opponents, even news media. Let's illustrate this form of reputation damage with another example in which President Biden takes the lead role. When Biden, at the age of 80, entered the race for reelection, it provided an opening for critics and jokes, both within the Democratic Party and from his opponents, mostly focused on his age and mental and physical abilities. Although the media captured moments that some interpreted as signs of Biden's cognitive decline, there were a series of instances taken out of context or selectively edited videos that showed that the situation was much worse than it appeared. One example involved a video circulating online showing how President Biden tried to sit on what was described as a nonexistent chair at the ceremony held in France for the eightieth anniversary of the Normandy Landings, the operation that was crucial in the liberation of France and Western Europe during the Second World War. Some news media outlets published the story on their sites, relying solely on the video that was shared on social media. Among them was a Turkish site, Haberler, that posted a story titled, "Biden, as you know, tried to sit on an empty chair on the stage" (2024). Such ridiculing or attacking another person in the headline should raise a red flag. The story posted by Haberler, with no reference to the author who wrote it, described the footage, stating how "Biden can be seen bending his knees and waving his hand in the air as if searching for an imaginary chair" (para. 4). Instantly after the event, mainstream news media debunked the story, clearly demonstrating that the video was edited. There was a chair for the president, and it was quite visible; however, the video circulating on social media was cut at the moment Biden sat in the chair to look like he just bent to sit on an imaginary chair (Goldin, 2024).

It is also important to inspect the date when the story was published and the name of the author who wrote it. Does the story have a date and author's name at all? Including a publication date is part of the journalist's routine that indicates when the story was made available to the reader. When a story includes both the date and the location where it was written or where the said event occurred, this is referred to as a dateline. Aside from the dateline, news stories also have a byline, which represents the name of the writer of the story. Patterson et al. (2019) suggested that stories that have no author "deserve extra scrutiny" (p. 174). This is true, but it refers mainly to the sources unfamiliar to us. One should keep in mind that even mainstream global news media publish articles with no authors. The reason for this is not because they are hiding something, which is the case with sources that need to be scrutinized, but purely professional. For example, if you go to the BBC or Cable News Network (CNN) websites, you will find both stories that have a byline and those that do not. According to the BBC ("Learn How the BBC Is Working," 2017), the name of the journalist is added to the article that is a product of original reporting, while general news stories omit the byline. The BBC further explains that these general stories usually combine information from multiple sources or may have been written by several staff members. Another prominent news organization, the *Economist* newspaper, established in 1843, uses journalistic objectivity as a rationale for publishing articles with no bylines. Specifically, the *Economist* states that its articles are "written anonymously because its collective voice and personality matter more than the identities of individual journalists" ("Inspiring Progress Globally," n.d., para. 6). Finally, news organizations still heavily rely on wire services to obtain news, which is the reason that instead of a byline, you will see the name of the wire that produced the article (e.g., AP, Reuters, AFP).

Hence, even though the steps above are important in identifying what is real from what is not, they are not necessarily enough. In a digital news ecosystem, there are legit news organizations that tend to attract audiences with sensationalistic headlines, as well as prominent media that do not include bylines if they curate information from multiple sources. This is the reason to go beyond the website on which you have encountered information that you believe would be wise to inspect further. In fact, whenever you are suspicious

about the source and have a gut feeling that something is wrong or appears too good to be real, look for evidence elsewhere by comparing the source that provided the original information with others that you deem relevant. This process is called lateral reading, as it requires you to go beyond the initial source to verify the information given to you.

Why is lateral reading important? Scholarly research suggests that this particular activity assists a reader in developing digital literacy. One such example is a study of undergraduate students at the prestigious Stanford University and college professors at universities in California and Washington state, which showed huge differences between those who engaged in lateral reading or inspecting diverse sources outside the website in question versus vertical reading or inspecting solely the website itself. Those who engaged in lateral reading and looked for information outside the site were much more efficient in distinguishing between facts and fiction than those who stayed inside the site and focused on inspecting it thoroughly (McGrew et al., 2017). Lateral reading is crucial when dealing with sites that look well organized and appealing. In other words, there are websites that have upped their game, meaning that they do not contain sloppy errors or look unappealing, which is why it would be hard to tell that something is simply wrong the moment you see its content. Hence, with lateral reading, you will be able to verify both written and multimedia information and be confident that the content you are dealing with is trustworthy or questionable. In the process of lateral reading, one of the most reliable ways to inspect the authenticity of a photograph is through reverse image search. We can investigate potential scenarios in which you might engage in such an activity. Imagine, for instance, that you are a producer at a news organization based in New York who has just received information about a tornado in Louisiana, but you have no staff in that area that will supply you with relevant multimedia items that depict the damages caused by this natural disaster. What you do is turn to the internet and find pictures online, on social media, and then ask users who posted them if you could use them to portray this unfortunate event on your news organization's site. They give you a signal that you can use the images, and you automatically post them on your website. What you need to do before posting the photographs of the disaster is ensure you are

using the tools available to you to verify the authenticity of those images. Open your browser, launch Google, and then click on the image icon on the right-hand side of the search box. Upload an image and see if it has been published before, perhaps portraying a tornado that hit another part of the country, not Louisiana. This tool on Google was very helpful to me when I worked as a reporter in the first and second decade of the twenty-first century. At one instance, I found images on Twitter and Facebook that allegedly portrayed flooding of the town of Obrenovac in northwest Serbia. When I used the reverse image tool to verify if these photographs were taken there, I found many of them posted online years before, portraying floods not only in other parts of Europe but also in Indonesia. Even though this is a good tool to use, as it will assist you in detecting false content, bear in mind that new technologies keep advancing, and you might need to go beyond Google to determine what images to trust. Considering that photographs could be manipulated, which challenges the engine to recognize them, the best approach is combining online assessment tools with human judgment to establish their credibility (Faraon et al., 2020).

Readers might also be confused about the source they obtain information from, especially when such a source has been encountered on social media. There are different ways to stumble upon news on social media, such as seeing a story and consuming it directly on these platforms or clicking on a link that takes a reader to the news site from which the story originated (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). To ensure credibility of multimedia items and other information found on social media, prominent news organizations have employees dedicated to verifying such content (Hatte & Zhuravskaya, 2023). In fact, understanding the scale of the problem, they nowadays have teams that deal with not only suspicious content found on social media and other platforms but also pages on their websites dedicated to fact-checking. Some examples include the AP Fact Check page, NPR's Fact Check, BBC Verify, the *Washington Post*'s Fact Checker, and PBS News Fact Checks. Aside from the fact-checking pages of news organizations, there are websites that are fully dedicated to debunking conspiracies and fake news. They represent excellent sources for suspicious recent stories as well as for fake news that has been circulating around for an extended period of time. Among the most prominent

ones are Fact Check (www.factcheck.org) and the previously mentioned Snopes (www.snopes.com). With all these resources in mind and the steps listed above to follow, you will feel more confident and knowledgeable when inspecting digital content to stay well-informed about current events.

While anyone can be duped online, it is important to note that people's attitudes shape how they perceive media content. Tsang (2021), for instance, conducted an experiment to examine how source attribution impacts people's perception of news fakeness, inaccuracy, and intent. She found that news sources, or messages coming either from legacy news outlets, online forums, or not attributed to any sources, did not have an effect on the perceived fakeness, inaccuracy, and intent of such messages among the participants. However, it was observed that the experiment participants who were exposed to a story that did not align with their attitudes on the matter at hand perceived the story attributed to the legacy media as less fake than those who shared the same beliefs but were asked to read a story with no attribution. Tsang (2021) further added that the same effect was not detected among those to whom the same message was consistent with their beliefs. They perceived the message the same way whether it came from legacy news media or if it had no source attribution, as it did not cause discomfort to them because it was in line with their position on the matter.

In the United States, where news organizations are described as "left-leaning," "right-leaning," or "mixed," the partisan divide has a huge impact on people's perception of the media and trust in the news they deliver. Writing about fake news, McNair (2017) suggested that this phenomenon is strongly connected to the declining trust in politicians and news media. Statistics portraying people's perceptions of the media are disturbing, as evidenced by a 2023 Gallup poll, which recorded the lowest trust in the media ever. The poll shows that less than one-third of Americans (32 percent) trust the media "a great deal" or "a fair amount," which was a slight drop in comparison to 2022 when it was 34 percent (Brenan, 2023, para. 1). Public trust in the federal government is even lower, as only 22 percent of Americans claim they trust the government "just about always" or "most of the time" ("Public Trust in Government," 2024, para. 1). These numbers are disturbing, as they show that our democracy is more fragile than we think.

Clearly, narratives spread by diverse types of false information pose a significant threat to democratic institutions, distorting public perception and influencing electoral outcomes. Recognizing the importance of preserving a healthy democracy where people make decisions based on trustworthy information, this chapter discussed key concepts that undermine this foundation, such as misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news. Although related terms, each of them has a distinct meaning. While misinformation is being spread without awareness of its falsehood, the remaining three have malicious intent at their core. Their goal is to cause harm and manipulate public opinion, thus threatening informed decision-making, trust in institutions, and weakening democratic discourse. Fake news and conspiracies have become so deeply ingrained in our society that we can hardly expect them to disappear overnight. It is impossible to avoid them, but it is possible to protect yourself from them. Developing news literacy skills will enable you to critically assess and analyze messages and information found in the digital media ecosystem. It will arm you with the ability to critically assess information coming from unknown sources. Use common sense to determine if something feels off, engage in lateral reading, inspect the source URL and "About" page, check the date and byline, and identify if there are people or organizations that the story attacks. The fight against false information requires a collective effort, as every individual contributes to this process with their knowledge and awareness of misleading content. Only in an environment where truth is valued and verified information is accessible can we foster a healthy democracy.

4

Navigating the Internet

Facts vs. Opinions

Opinion Journalism

Objectivity stands as one of the cornerstones of good journalism. It is illuminated by a commitment to present information accurately, allowing relevant sides of the story to express their viewpoints, and avoiding personal perspectives from interfering with the story and distorting the truth. The goal of objectivity is to present audiences with topic or event coverage in a balanced manner, enabling them to form opinions based on the facts provided to them. Regardless, not all readers, listeners, and viewers who encounter news content either online or offline can praise it for portraying events in an unbiased manner. Living up to the ideal of objectivity has always faced challenges, which is why the line between neutral and opinion-driven reporting often becomes blurred. Clearly, when we engulf in the news environment, we encounter articles that are out of balance, those that invite readers to support a certain cause, economic measures, advocacy groups, or political ideas. This is problematic when such bias exists in the domain occupied by general stories, covering day-to-day events and current issues, as that is where journalists are expected to be objective. However, there is an area in which expressing opinions is desirable, not frowned upon, and when doing so, media representatives break no professional norms. That area is referred to as opinion journalism.

In American newspapers, opinion journalism usually takes four forms: editorials, opinion columns, op-eds, and letters to the editor (Kelling &

Thomas, 2018). The last one listed could also be categorized as a form of participatory journalism, bearing in mind that it allows readers to contribute to storytelling and share their viewpoints on current events and issues. Therefore, the difference between letters to the editor and the first three above-listed forms of journalism is illuminated through the voices they represent. According to Kelling and Thomas (2018), while editorials, opinion columns, and op-eds denote formats through which editors and journalists express their viewpoints, letters to the editor represent the voice of the people.

Editorials are also referred to as leading articles. They "require a distinctive style and form of expression, occupy a special place in the physical geography of a newspaper, represent the collective institutional voice of a newspaper rather than that of an individual, have no bylines in the majority of countries, and are written with differing aims and motivations to news reports" (Firmstone, 2019, p. 1). Thus, editorials are crafted with elements of opinion that represent the newspaper's or other media organization's position on a particular matter, while opinion columns and op-eds express individual views. Editorials can represent the position of the entire newsroom, but not necessarily. For instance, the *New York Times*'s editorials are published by the newspaper's editorial board, which is separate from the newsroom and the *Times* as a whole. Instead, it is "made up of opinion journalists who rely on research, debate and individual expertise to reach a shared view of important issues" ("The New York Times Editorial Board," n.d., para. 1).

Editorials are a powerful tool that news organizations employ to initiate a debate on significant problems and influence politics (Firmstone, 2019). As an illustration, in an editorial titled, "The Guardian view on a global health crisis: living longer may not mean living healthier" (2024), this prominent British news media organization expressed concerns regarding premature deaths from chronic diseases that affect mostly underdeveloped countries. This is followed by a critique of developed countries and their impact on shaping health trends in poor countries, with the statement that, "Unfortunately, it seems too much of the world considers that if the poor are out of sight, they are largely out of mind. Yet it is the West that is shaping the poor world's health crises" (para. 2). Aside from the global health crisis, the *Guardian* editorials have covered and raised awareness of many other relevant topics, including

a race for missile supremacy, the Lebanon ceasefire in December 2024, the assisted dying debate, defense spending, and other significant political and societal issues.

In American journalism, editorials are particularly powerful in the context of elections. Despite their stated commitment to neutrality and independence, as outlined in the mission statements of US-based organizations (Pantic & Ziek, 2025), the American press has a long-standing tradition of endorsing political candidates. As an illustration, during the presidential race in 2016, the *LA Times* published an editorial endorsing a member of the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, for president. While doing so, the newspaper used strong language, which is commonly seen in editorials and other opinion pieces published by the US media. In the editorial, the *LA Times* argued that the Republican Party candidate in the election, Donald Trump, would be a catastrophic choice as he is unfit for the role ("Editorial: Hillary Clinton Would Make a Sober, Smart and Pragmatic President," 2016). According to this newspaper, Trump "has run a divisive, belligerent, dishonest campaign, repeatedly aligning himself with racists, strongmen and thugs while maligning or dismissing large segments of the American public" (para. 2). The *LA Times* then detailed why Clinton would be a good choice for president and why Trump was dangerous. Another unexpected endorsement occurred that same year, ahead of Election Day. It came from *Variety,* an American weekly magazine established in 1905 and focused primarily on entertainment business news, that decided to endorse a candidate for the first time in the magazine's more than a century-long history. The rationale for this decision was that the magazine "didn't want to sit on the sidelines and come down on the wrong side of history" (Eller & Wallenstein, 2016, para. 1). Similarly, *USA Today* decided to break away from its tradition after four years of Trump's presidency. In 2020, it endorsed Democratic Party candidate Joseph Biden for president, which was the first time the paper resorted to this action in its 38-year-long history at the time. The newspaper's Editorial Board explained this precedent by the political climate that they could not consider normal and the president who was dangerous for the country (Carroll, 2020).

American newspapers endorse candidates to offer guidance to readers on who to vote for based on the newspaper's principles and analysis of the

candidates' qualifications and abilities to perform the role. While *Variety* and *USA Today* refrained from expressing their preference regarding presidential candidates until 2016 and 2020, some newspapers changed their tradition in the opposite direction. Among them is the *New York Times*, which decided to break away from its tradition of embracing candidates in 2024. Still, this new practice applies to local elections only. The *Times* announced that it will continue its more than 160-year-long tradition of endorsing presidential candidates, while the same will no longer apply to races for New York governor and mayor of New York City (Robertson & Fandos, 2024). The newspaper did not elaborate on the reasons for this shift in candidate endorsements. At the same time, some other media outlets that decided to cease the practice of creating editorials in support of certain political candidates listed evident reasons for that: lack of trust in the media caused by the reader's struggle to perceive them as objective, especially when they strongly advocate for one option in the political spectrum. Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund and one of the second-largest newspaper publishers in the United States after Gannett, which owns about 200 newspapers in the country, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Boston Herald*, announced in 2022 that it would no longer endorse political candidates. Among the reasons for this decision were changes in the news environment marked by reader alienation, fierce online debates, and issues regarding news literacy. Alden Global Capital stressed that "with misinformation and disinformation on the rise, readers are often confused, especially online, about the differences between news stories, opinion pieces and editorials" (Robertson, 2022, para. 5).

While editorials such as the one written by the *Guardian*—signed by a single journalist—clearly expresses a viewpoint of this UK-based newspaper, opinion columns represent the product of a journalist who works for the organization that published them. They are frequently written in the first person and cover a wide range of topics, from politics and the economy to movie industry and fashion. In the news media ecology, they occupy a unique space, blending news gathering and reporting with personal perspective to offer analysis, commentary, and advocacy. Opinion columns reflect personal viewpoints, which are frequently seen in the headline, with examples including "Opinion | The Project 2025 Leader Stepped Down. It Means Nothing," a piece written

by Huffington Post Opinion Editor Stephen A. Crockett Jr. Not only does the reader clearly see from the first word in the headline that the story they are looking at is an opinion, but they can also notice this from the viewpoint expressed in it, "It Means Nothing." In this opinion column, Crockett Jr. (2024) elaborated on the conservative initiative titled Project 2025, designed by the Heritage Foundation think tank to promote right-wing policies. The journalist discussed the details of the plan, including a national abortion ban and an increase in the retirement age, and then reflected on Trump's attempts to disassociate himself from the Heritage Foundation's initiative because it might damage him. Further in the column, Crockett Jr. dismissed Trump's claim, stating that it is evident that "Trump and Project 2025 go together, real bad" (para. 7).

Opinion pieces allow journalists to exercise the independence of their mind (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Looking into the article about Trump and Project 2025, Crockett Jr. undoubtedly takes a position against this initiative and tells the reader that Trump cannot be separated from it. Rather than being neutral, which is expected when journalists write hard news stories, Crockett Jr. strived to show intellectual independence in his opinion column, delivering facts to the reader and verifying information while also taking a personal stand on it. Furthermore, he did that on the news website with which he is affiliated and where his piece is clearly labeled as an opinion. And this is one of the key distinctions between opinion journalism and opinions shared elsewhere in the digital media sphere, especially social media. When journalists write opinion pieces, they are still expected to bring up and elaborate on facts, even providing insights or information that their readers were not aware of. In contrast, within the social media sphere, it might be challenging to determine if an opinion is based on facts, especially when it originates from an anonymous user or an account with little to no credibility. Such content, hosted on social media platforms, is likely to reach a wider audience than an opinion piece, yet it does not typically fall within the realm of professional journalism content, and thus, we cannot hold those users accountable for what they say in a way that we would hold those whose job description is to deliver verified, fact-supported stories to the public. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) stressed, it is crucial that journalists adhere to the principles of delivering the truth and

being committed to citizens, for whom they do the work. Journalists have a role in verifying and synthesizing information for their audience. They are tasked with investigating and reporting accurately on events behind assertions circulating in public discourse, which is why their obligation is to deliver the truth, even when writing opinion pieces in which they are expected to advocate for a position they believe is right.

Ruben Navarrette, a widely read Latino columnist who writes for the *Washington Post*, explained that writing opinion pieces requires a lot of reading, research, and deep thinking. According to him, "To write with authority, be confident in what you're saying. That takes research, but also a willingness to consider alternative points of view" (Vela-Williamson, 2024, para. 8). This statement aligns with the point that Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) made, stressing that opinion journalism should go beyond journalists expressing their viewpoints. It needs to involve substance and research. To be perceived as professionals with authority whose opinions are appreciated and who can build loyal audiences with their opinion pieces, journalists need to dissect problems, provide facts, and also be able to elaborate on the opposing arguments while investing effort in convincing the public why it should accept their stance on the issue. This is because opinions are abundant, but not all contribute to a quality debate. To add value, opinions need to be supported by facts, thorough investigation, and a well-rounded analysis of the problem at hand. Through opinion journalism, people can educate themselves, explore diverse perspectives, and engage with a wide array of voices. When opinions are professionally crafted, they can provide depth, insights, and clarity that help the public understand complex issues.

Opinion columns clearly represent the voices of news providers, while op-eds, on the other hand, are "written by outside specialists, sometimes from outside journalism altogether" (Kelling & Thomas, 2018, p. 400). This is a popular way for newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, to provide a platform for experts and public figures to supply readers with knowledge and perspectives on political, societal, economic, and other issues. Through op-eds, they can impact the public's perceptions but also influence policymaking. To illustrate with an example, Mikhail Alexseev, a political science professor, wrote an opinion editorial for the *Los Angeles Times*

in which he advocated for greater support of the United States to Ukraine in order to secure peace in the country and suppress Russia's influence in the region. In this piece, Alexseev reflected on the most recent developments in the Russia-Ukraine war, stressing that regardless of the fact that Ukraine lags behind Russia in armament and soldiers, Ukrainians continue fighting for independence fiercely, which is why they should get assistance (Alexseev, 2024). Therefore, the author proposed that the US administration at the time under President Biden send more aid to Ukraine before transferring power to President Trump, because it would be an investment not only in Ukraine's security but also in US security. In this op-ed, the author evidently has a strong position on the Russia-Ukraine war, stressing the need to assist Ukraine as a crucial element of the fight against Russian expansionism. The reason the *LA Times* gave room for this opinion on its pages is Alexseev's expertise—at the time the op-ed was published, he was a professor of international relations at San Diego State University. Hence, the opinion published does not represent a position taken by the *Los Angeles Times* but rather a guest columnist who has the expertise to discuss the issue.

In addition to selected content that is labeled as an opinion, there are magazines that are solely designed to provide analysis and interpretations of events. Those include the *New Republic* and *National Review*. The *New Republic* is a left-leaning magazine and online platform that provides analysis on politics, climate, culture, and other topics. In the previous chapter, I reflected on the political orientation American newspapers or magazines demonstrate openly, placing themselves on the left or the right side of the political spectrum or, sometimes, in the center of it. This orientation can be detected in their "about" section, where they openly describe themselves as conservative or liberal. However, as you continue developing your news literacy skills, you will begin to notice subtle or, perhaps, not so subtle ways in which news media reveal which side of the political spectrum they lean toward. This is an important factor to consider when analyzing news stories. For instance, an article may incorporate specific epithets or loaded language that reveal its orientation. Looking into the *New Republic* and an article published after the presidential elections in 2024 titled, "Trump Has Handed Democrats a Fast Way to Build Some Working-Class Cred," a billionaire and owner of platform

X, Elon Musk, was called an "oligarch," which is a pejorative term used to describe rich people who have political influence. If Musk were mentioned in an article of a paper that was more supportive of Republicans and their business allies, other epithets would more likely be assigned to him, such as "an incredibly successful entrepreneur" or "the richest man in the world." In a more neutral media, Musk would simply be labeled as a "billionaire" or "Tesla and X-platform owner." Hence, these adjectives attached to a person's name or similar descriptions can tell us a lot about the media that published the story and its political orientation. The *National Review* and the *New Republic*, in particular, are expected to enrich the content with adjectives, as their orientation is providing interpretation of events through their own lenses. When writing a piece about Trump and his allies, including Musk, the *New Republic* journalist Tomasky (2024) used adjectives to describe them and then shifted his focus to the Democrats, explaining what they can do and how they can exercise power during the confirmation hearings of Trump's cabinet nominees. In the following paragraphs, Tomasky (2024) basically gave the Democrats some tips on what they should dig into when grilling the nominees:

> Looking over Trump's nominees, what is the great unifying theme? No, it's not that they're all Trump loyalists. That's true, but it was a given and is thus uninteresting. No, it's not that they're awful toward women. That's true of some of them, but only some. No, it's not that they've said and promised to do shocking things. That's true too, and they should be questioned aggressively on those matters, but that still isn't the great theme. The great theme is how many of them are massively rich. (Tomasky, 2024, para. 3–4)

Comparing the total net worth of Biden's Cabinet of $118 million to Trump's, which is at least $13.3 billion, Tomasky was making the point that the hearings represented an opportunity for the Democrats to speak to the working class, explaining that while Democratic representatives were depicted in the media, such as Fox News, as millionaires, the real plutocrats in the country are those around Trump. Clearly, Tomasky's analysis illustrates his and the magazine's sharp position on Trump's cabinet. On the other hand, another analytical magazine, the *National Review*, portrays political reality in the United States through a different set of lenses. Unlike the *New Republic*, which occupies the

left side of the political spectrum, the *National Review* covers political, social, economic, and cultural affairs from a conservative perspective. In line with that, their portrayal of Elon Musk differs to a great extent in comparison to what we have seen in the article published by the *New Republic*. Using the epithet "the richest man in the world," senior writer at this media outlet, Michael Brendan Dougherty, explains why Musk is invaluable for the Republican Party. He does describe the billionaire as "boyishly enthusiastic" but relevant and aspirational. According to Dougherty (2024), "As a business pioneer via Tesla, Starlink, and SpaceX, he has forever associated himself with luxury sports cars and a renaissance in rocket and satellite technology. These industries are powerful sources of American nostalgia and symbols of American progress" (para. 3). He also describes the Democratic Party as the one that attracts elites and affluent people, not the working class, as the *New Republic* columnist suggested. This is also an example of a wise approach to writing commentary. In the piece, the author pointed out what is evident to many conservatives—that Musk oftentimes appears boyish—then shifted to explaining how his behavior and personality traits could benefit conservatives. Such an approach is crucial in writing an effective commentary, as the author acknowledged and addressed the arguments of the opposing side, after which he brought up the points from the other side, focusing on them. This creates a perception of an author as a person who has considered all angles before taking a firm position on an issue.

Argument Culture and Post-truth Society

Opinion pieces can cause controversies and initiate fierce debates. They are inherently about advocating a particular perspective with an aim to influence public opinion. In the pre-digital era, writing opinion pieces was often considered a mark of prestige, indicating that the writer possessed solid experience, deep knowledge, and expertise to articulate and share their viewpoints with others. Furthermore, the space to express opinions was limited to traditional media, such as newspapers, television, and radio. Today, we are witnessing an entirely different landscape, with virtually unlimited space for

content creation, which appears to host more opinions and facts. The internet has democratized the ability to express opinions, yet it oftentimes serves as a catalyst for fierce debates, strong opinions, and arguments over a wide range of topics, from celebrity fashion to international politics. We indeed live in an era where debates are shaped by what American author and professor Deborah Tannen labeled as the "argument culture." On one hand, the internet has empowered people to participate in discussions across diverse platforms in real time, creating opportunities for them to have their voices heard and acknowledged. On the other hand, this empowerment can sometimes yield unintended consequences. Instead of balanced debates that accommodate a vast array of viewpoints, what we frequently encounter are polarized arguments and extreme opinions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Freedom of expression and diversity of viewpoints are crucial for democratic systems to thrive, yet the rise of combative debates common in the argument culture might undermine these ideals. The environment in which this exchange is fierce is unlikely to result in constructive ideas and solutions. In fact, Tannen (2013) suggested that a hostile atmosphere in which public discourse takes place can have a detrimental impact on society. According to her, the argument culture "makes it more difficult to solve problems and is corrosive to the human spirit" (p. 179).

Whereas certain forms of journalism, particularly opinion journalism, tend to utilize provocative language to attract attention, the argument culture goes much further by fostering sensationalism and reinforcing existing divides. The argument culture challenges decision-making because it does not strive to achieve consensus on important issues, but instead distorts facts and divides people (Costanza, 2019). Although this culture primarily exists outside the news media space, on blogs, social media, and online forums, media do contribute to polarized debates themselves, as Tannen (2013) suggests. By adhering to the approach that every story should have two sides, media oftentimes provide space for people who promote extreme viewpoints. Such an agonistic, conflicting nature of discussions then spills over to society, exacerbating divisions. It influences how people interact with one another and approach societal challenges.

A two-sided-story approach does not mean that conversations are inclusive and non-polarizing. In fact, when the journalistic principle of neutrality

discussed in Chapter 1 is perceived solely as presenting all sides of the story equally, it does not always contribute to constructive discussions. An example that illustrates this point is news media reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic and conspiracies surrounding it, when, in an attempt to present themselves as unbiased, they gave a voice to activists, such as anti-vaxxers, who build their arguments on opinions and beliefs, not scientific facts (Rehagen, 2020). Hence, they give space to unsubstantiated assertions, contrasting those with the claims of most medical experts who have provided evidence of vaccine effectiveness. In other words, allowing extremists and radical conspiracists to express their opinions through mainstream media in the name of objective reporting is not only unprofessional but also dangerous. As Rehagen (2020) suggested, "by prizing balance in stories about controversial issues such as vaccinations and climate change, reporters can unintentionally wind up helping to spread misinformation" (para. 22). Thus, it is important for news media to set an example by providing fair representation of sources, where two or three or more sides bring in arguments that are based on science and facts, not on opinions that occupy extreme sides of the political spectrum.

The "argument culture," characterized by an emphasis on conflict and polarization, is further amplified in the "post-truth" era. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) described post-truth as a concept that relates to "a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs rather than one based on facts" (para. 1). Similarly, Oxford Languages defines post-truth as an adjective "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Word of the Year 2016," para. 2). Brousselle (2024) went further in this definition, describing post-truth as "the combination of tactics of influence and opinion manipulation orchestrated by powerful economic and political interests, which primarily target initiatives or ideas with a transformative potential" (p. 533). This suggests that post-truth mechanisms are frequently employed to combat progressive objectives with the aim to preserve the status quo. One such example would be spreading false information to intensify narratives that discredit climate activists. Therefore, Brousselle (2024) emphasized the power dynamics and vested interests behind the post-truth phenomenon, describing it as a deliberate and calculated exercise of influence.

Krasni (2020) suggested that circumstances under which media ownership is in the hands of several corporations and media magnates and where news organizations openly support the establishment or political candidates, which was the case with the US presidential election in 2016, affect truthful storytelling and place us in a post-truth world. According to him, post-truth "denotes indignation to lies and emotional orchestration of the (represented) public opinion in support of obvious wrongdoing" (p. 7). In addition, Krasni (2020) pointed at cases of journalists fabricating stories and publishing them through prominent media channels, which further impacts the declining trust in the news. Such cases include, but are not limited to, Jayson Blair, a former *New York Times* staff member whose reports were based on plagiarism and made-up quotes (Folkenflik, 2009), and Jack Kelly, a prominent *USA Today* correspondent who even earned a Pulitzer Prize nomination for a piece that was later proven to be fabricated (Steinberg, 2004). When false reports get continuously published in newspapers, which is not a common occurrence yet evident in the case of the abovementioned reporters, that affects citizens' trust in the media and blurs the line between reality and fiction. Aside from that, as Tannen (2013) stressed, insisting on two sides of every story can also be detrimental. Sometimes it results in giving a voice to individuals who do not possess fact-based knowledge, just to create some sort of news balance, which further indicates that in addition to social media, news media occasionally also contribute to the distortion of the truth.

While certain cases in journalism are accountable for planting seeds of the post-truth world, social media have just further amplified the problem. Their algorithms shape our online experience by favoring emotionally engaging and ideologically aligned content. In the current digital ecosystem, facts compete with misinformation, disinformation, and rumors, enabling people to find whatever suits them to confirm what they already believe (Rehagen, 2020). Science is also in competition with narratives created by groups that benefit from spreading false information and frequently get supported by public figures, which further magnifies the problem (Brousselle, 2024). Post-truth is thus intertwined with questionable sources, misinformation, partisan content, and ignited debates. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that Bufacchi (2021) called post-truth a "blood relative" of fake news in his efforts to describe

the two as related phenomena that thrive in the current media and political landscape (p. 347). Both are focused on undermining what is objectively truth, post-truth by prioritizing what is emotionally appealing to an audience, and fake news by targeting people with false information disguised as legitimate news. Fake news thrives in the post-truth environment, in which personal biases and emotional resonance take supremacy over accurate information. Both affect society's perception of what is true and what is false, contributing to the erosion of trust in media and institutions.

Hussain (2019) stressed that the post-truth phenomenon is not only illuminated in misinformation, deception, and false data but also in questioning if the truth exists at all. According to this author, "the post-truth thrives in the manipulation of the process and the corruption of the machinery by which facts are gathered and then used to shape people's opinion about issues" (p. 152). It is also intriguing to examine how facts are being perceived in comparison to opinions and beliefs. Science-based knowledge does not claim to be 100 percent accurate and thus comes with a degree of uncertainty, while knowledge built on personal experiences and beliefs arms people with more certainty (Wight, 2018). This adds another layer of complexity to changing people's perspectives on issues where they have already formed firm attitudes. Additionally, individuals are prone to confirmation bias, which is a tendency to look for and favor information that is consistent with their existing beliefs. This type of bias stems from people's inclination to reduce the discomfort when confronted with information that challenges their worldviews. They have mental models of how the world works that impact their actions and interpretations of events, so a person who does not believe, for instance, that climate change is caused by human activities is unlikely to accept any information that contradicts this belief (Costanza, 2019). Instead, they are likely to selectively focus on sources that reinforce their perspective on global warming. Topics such as climate change are particularly susceptible to post-truth claims, considering that alternative facts are powerful in disrupting processes in society that require transformative action (Brousselle, 2024).

In addition to that, embracing a position based on pure claims, not facts, can have a detrimental impact on society, especially when such claims are disseminated by high-profile individuals, whom we expect to be accountable

for their actions. As an illustration, in spring 2017, President Donald Trump delivered a speech in which he announced that the country was going to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, an international treaty signed by 196 parties in 2015 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference with an aim to combat climate change. Trump said that "The Paris Climate Accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries, leaving American workers—who I love—and taxpayers to absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production" ("Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord," 2017, para. 6). The statement, followed by the applause from Trump's supporters and staff, was quite disturbing. While it has been widely accepted by most scientists and prominent institutions that human activities have an impact on global warming and other climate issues, Trump embraced pseudoscience, labeling climate change as a "hoax" and denying what years of research and discussions have revealed (McNair, 2017). The promise Trump made was fulfilled in 2020, when the United States officially exited the Paris Agreement, backing out of a commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Daley, 2020). However, as soon as President Joseph Biden entered the White House in January 2021, he signed a document aimed at bringing the country back into the Paris Agreement (Blinken, 2021).

The election of Trump for president and Brexit, or referendum in the United Kingdom on European Union (EU) membership, are among common examples present in scholarly literature about post-truth (e.g., Hussain, 2019; van Dyk, 2022). Both events took place in 2016, contributing to making "post-truth" the word of the year. They also showed how facts and expert opinions were frequently overshadowed by false narratives, emphasizing emotional appeals and calling for skepticism toward traditional news sources to shape public opinion. The United Kingdom was a member of what we know today as the European Union since 1973, but it decided to leave this organization about four decades later. In June 2016, a referendum was held in which UK citizens were deciding whether they would like their country to remain a member of the EU. The majority of voters, 51.9 percent of them, voted to leave this supranational organization, with a likelihood that many of them made decisions

based on unverified and false information that was presented to them during the campaign, as multiple fact-checkers from prominent news outlets suggest (e.g., Reuters, BBC, The Telegraph). Among them were claims that the United Kingdom was paying the EU £350 million a week (Kirk, 2017; "EU referendum campaigns 'misleading voters,'" 2016). Although the United Kingdom did pay more to the EU than it received in return, the actual amount was lower than the figures reported in the media. After accounting for discounts or rebates, the United Kingdom was sending about £250 million per week to the Union ("Boris Johnson: Does His £350m a Week Brexit Claim Add Up?" 2017; Kirk, 2017). These claims mainly came from pro-Brexit politicians and media. To convince people to vote against EU membership, they also highlighted the loss of sovereignty and the United Kingdom's position of frequently being outvoted in the EU, which was also not correct (Kirk, 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to note that misleading claims were made by both pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit politicians. In that regard, the Treasury Select Committee of the UK Parliament, according to BBC, pointed out that the claim of 3 million jobs that would be lost in case the country left the EU was misleading ("EU Referendum Campaigns 'Misleading Voters,'" 2016). According to this BBC article, the Committee reflected on multiple other claims, accusing "peddling 'misleading' figures and 'implausible assumptions'" in the referendum campaigns (para. 1).

Both Brexit and the US presidential elections were inherently political processes that involved public decision-making. Clearly, politics has been susceptible to lies and misinformation for a long time, and even though the Oxford Dictionary declared "post-truth" word of the year in 2016 ("'Post-Truth' Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," 2016), the cultivation of this phenomenon had started before the emergence of social media. As discussed in Chapter 3, propaganda, misinformation, and distortion of the truth, which are all "relatives" of the post-truth phenomenon, were prevalent even in the pre-digital era. However, the twenty-first century has seen a dramatic increase in the speed and the number of channels through which such falsehoods are disseminated, often without consequences for those who spread them (van Dyk, 2022). In other words, even when the truth is revealed, the liar simply gets away. News media do engage in fact-checking of information, but that process is not necessarily embraced by audiences.

In fact, Barrera et al. (2020) found that messages representing alternative facts and crafted by politicians are quite persuasive and believable among their supporters, lessening the significance of the fact-checking process. Furthermore, they found that the impact of alternative facts was stronger among voters who were uninformed. To a certain extent, this could explain the Brexit vote, considering that after a very tight race and citizens' decision to support the exit from the EU, people started searching for information online regarding this organization and the United Kingdom's membership in it. In an article titled, "Britons Are Frantically Googling What the EU Is After Voting to Leave It," *The Independent*'s journalist Brian Fung (2016) reported that many people did not appear informed about what they really voted for. Fung's article includes an embedded Twitter post from Google Trends that shows that after the referendum, the top UK search questions about the EU included, "What does it mean to leave the EU," "What is the EU," and "What countries are in the EU" (para. 9). Lack of knowledge is not the only issue here. As post-truth thrives upon people's selection of information that aligns with their established beliefs (Hussain, 2019), it is likely that they will primarily focus on what is not causing any discomfort, making them confident in what they already believe. When people are exposed to a wide range of options, which is the case with the digital media environment, they tend to look into the articles and posts that align with their beliefs, forming "filter bubbles" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Hence, those who were already against the EU, even if they did not possess any knowledge of it, were likely looking for statements and content posted by politicians and sources that wanted to see the United Kingdom out of the EU.

Both Brexit and the 2016 presidential elections in the United States also represent a shift toward the right side of the political spectrum, but they are not isolated examples. Van Dyk (2022) suggested that there is a global trend in turning to the right, which "has been described as a crisis of truth, a sign of a post-factual age, a new boom in lying, and even as a threat to the relationship—as championed by liberals—between democracy, the public sphere and truth" (p. 37). Claims on polarizing topics spread fast, as evidenced by events such as Brexit and the 2016 presidential elections. What also happens, according to Brousselle (2024), is that "the same ideas are framed in different ways by actors who, knowingly or not, work in concert" (p. 536). These individuals, according

to this author, include online groups, officials, politicians, influencers, trolls, think tanks, and other organizations.

To sum up, opinions present an integral part of our interactions with information. We form attitudes and viewpoints about current events and news based on our values, knowledge, content we are exposed to, and our experiences. The news media landscape supplies the public with hard news stories, those that organize information based on its importance (i.e., inverted pyramid) or in chronological order (i.e., live blogs), where a reporter refrains from exposing their bias in a story. In addition to that, there is a unique space occupied by opinion journalism that blends objectivity or fact-supported paragraphs with personal or newsroom perspectives. Such pieces are legit in journalism, and they tend to take the form of editorials, opinion columns, op-eds, and letters to the editor (Kelling & Thomas, 2018). Editorials represent the voice of the media organization or newsroom as a collective; opinion columns are written by journalists; op-eds by experts; while letters to the editor represent the voice of people. Opinion journalism advocates for specific viewpoints and allows people to engage with complex issues. Although it can enrich public discourse, opinion journalism can also contribute to further polarization and undermine trust in the media by blurring the lines between facts and personal advocacy. As Debora Tannen (2013) noted, extreme, two-sided viewpoints reflect the argument culture that drifts away from constructive, democratic debates.

The twenty-first-century media landscape is characterized by the continuous flow of information but also an influx of opinions. They are not limited to op-eds and opinion columns. Instead, anonymous people on the internet post content, spread information, and engage in discussions, expressing boldly their perspectives on a wide range of topics and current events. Even though democratic systems encourage the plurality of viewpoints, the dynamics of online platforms present a far more complex reality. Algorithms tailor content to personal history and preferences, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing attitudes. In addition to that, misinformation and disinformation spread quickly, challenging an individual's attempt to critically evaluate the content they are exposed to.

In a world of alternative facts, post-truth—the phenomenon where emotional appeals and personal belief have supremacy over the truth—thrives.

Bufacchi (2021) noted that post-truth would likely never disappear, but it can still be confronted at the institutional, moral, and the philosophical levels. At the institutional level, he emphasized the importance of the distinction among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of power, stressing that those who hold executive power should not abuse it and act superior to the judiciary. Furthermore, they should allow the media to act independently. With respect to the moral front, Bufacchi (2021) argues that individuals should refrain from participating in disseminating content that resembles post-truth, while at the philosophical level, he believes that it is important to "move beyond the binary distinction of truth versus post-truth" (p. 357). That means abandoning the concept that the truth itself should come from the consensus of what the truth is, and instead adopting the view that the truth should be grounded in facts that cannot be refuted. Hence, the two terms, truth and post-truth, should be approached separately. As Bufacchi (2021) suggests, "the best way to disarm post-truth is not to talk about truth unless it is absolutely necessary, and appropriate" (p. 359).

I would also argue that combating post-truth requires a strong emphasis on digital news literacy. In an era where false content and emotionally charged narratives often drown out facts, arming people with tools and skills that enable them to critically examine each piece of information is not just important—it is essential. No one likes being misled, yet many fall victim to deceptive content because they struggle to discern truth from manipulation. Fostering analytical thinking, understanding the difference between opinions and facts, source verification, and awareness of media biases will enable them to navigate the complex media landscape with confidence. Ultimately, an informed and vigilant public is one of the most powerful defense mechanisms against the corrosive effects of argument culture and post-truth rhetoric.

5

Participatory Journalism

In a contemporary news ecology, citizens are not only mere receivers of information disseminated by mainstream media. Digital disruption has given currency to ordinary people, arming them with countless opportunities to document and report events across the globe. Nowadays, individuals with internet access are viewed as engaged media users who actively explore and interact with content they encounter on online platforms, often creating alternative news narratives in the process. On the grounds of this development, engagement with news is not only translated into the time people spend reading, listening, or watching the news but also in the way they interact with it. For instance, after completing reading an article online, a user's interaction with the said piece may not necessarily end with closing the page and moving on to another task. They could opt instead to take additional actions that deepen their engagement with the story. Such actions could include liking the article to indicate approval of what is written, sharing it within their network of friends, family, and followers to spread awareness of the issue discussed in it, recommending it to others as worth reading, or leaving a comment to express their opinion, ask questions, or engage in a discussion. Such behaviors shape how news is disseminated and interpreted within society.

Aside from interacting with news produced by professional journalists, citizens are also equipped with tools that allow them to create and distribute content outside the mass media space. They can publish posts reflecting their ideas, concerns, opinions, or moments captured with a camera directly on social media, websites, and other online platforms. Not only can they use their smartphones and other devices to share photographs and videos in real time or after an event has occurred, but they can also do it faster than legacy news media. Being acutely aware of the influence digital tools have granted

to citizens, news media closely monitor trending topics and discussions happening on online platforms, especially social media, recognizing them as valuable for news tips and insights into the public interests. This is important as news media need to pay close attention to audiences' wants and needs to thrive and survive in both traditional and digital media environments. Actually, audience engagement is a cornerstone of their success. As Wenzel and Nelson (2020) stressed, relationships as such between those who produce the news and those who engage with it in diverse ways have been an essential element of this profession:

> Relationships have long been at the heart of journalism. The reporter and their sources. The news outlet and its audience. Journalists and the community. Likewise, a number of movements and schools within journalism have been defined largely by how they prioritize such relationships and how power circulates between them. (p. 515)

In this exchange of information and efforts to engage citizens in producing and reacting to content hosted on news media platforms, participatory journalism was born. This type of journalism is embodied in citizens' active engagement in collecting, reporting, evaluating, and disseminating information. It "focuses on how journalists can furnish opportunities for people to participate in the co-creation of journalism" (Vos & Thomas, 2024, p. 870). Participatory journalism empowers members of the public to collaborate with news organizations, democratizing media production and making it a more inclusive process. Through this form of journalism, citizens "supply media organizations with real-time information, breaking news, videos from remote areas, still images of natural disasters, and other items that could contribute to more comprehensive coverage of events across the globe" (Pantic, 2023, p. 211).

In the previous chapters, I have explored diverse forms of participation, discussing how citizens share information and opinions on social media and disseminate news from media sources. The role of the public in information dissemination has in fact permeated this entire book, as developing digital news literacy skills inherently involves understanding not just how news is manufactured, but also how it circulates in online spaces. This chapter will

take a closer look at participatory journalism—a distinct form of engagement where individuals actively contribute to the news ecosystem. It will draw a line between activities related to it and other forms of participation, with the aim to provide a clearer framework for understanding the impact of participatory journalism on contemporary media landscapes.

Definition and Development of Participatory Journalism

Participatory journalism is a concept that emerged in the early 2000s as an integral part of journalism innovation efforts that have taken place in newsrooms across the globe. Yet, looking into the traditional media environment, one can detect that long before the internet entered newsrooms, audiences had engaged in activities such as signaling news, delivering information, and sharing their opinions with news organizations. Stuart Allan, who has done tremendous research in this area, suggested that "the notion of citizen journalism is really as old as journalism itself" (Hájek et al., 2014, p. 175). In the pre-digital era, citizens communicated information, shared news tips, and expressed opinions through face-to-face encounters with journalists, letters to the editor, or live telephone calls on air (Hájek et al., 2014; Pantic, 2023). If a fire or a car accident happened in their town, they could have simply telephoned a news outlet in their region and informed it about the incident. With the advent of the twenty-first century and the increasing accessibility of the internet, people have become equipped with new, innovative tools that enable them to create and distribute media artifacts (Pantic, 2023). The ease of access to new technologies allowed them to be more active producers and disseminators of information and to reach a wide audience with their messages, regardless of whether they produce them independently or under the news media umbrella.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, various terms have been used in academic literature in relation to participatory journalism. Among them are "citizen journalism," "user-generated content," "grassroots journalism," and "networked journalism" (Allan, 2009). Citizen journalism has attracted scholarly attention in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when people started documenting natural disasters and terrorist attacks with

their phones and then disseminating them further on the internet. In fact, the rise of this form of citizen engagement in reporting the news is frequently connected in the literature to the Indian earthquake and tsunami, where tourists documented the horrific natural disaster and shared it on their blogs and with news media (Allan, 2009; Hájek et al., 2014; Pantic, 2023). This event, representing the deadliest tsunami in history, happened in December 2004, killing more than 230,000 people ("Indian Ocean tsunami," 2004). The suddenness of this disaster took everyone by surprise, including global media outlets, which found themselves unprepared. As a result, they had to rely heavily on amateur photographs and accounts from bystanders who found themselves at the epicenter of the big event and captured what happened (Zeng et al., 2019). This was a big moment for many news organizations. The BBC, which prides itself on encouraging audience participation, experienced a new momentum in dealing with citizen contributions. The BBC, according to Taft (2014), received "thousands of mostly unsolicited emails from people who had been in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and elsewhere when the tsunami had hit and had witnessed dreadful things" (para. 3). This allowed them to collect accounts of a horrible disaster from the areas affected by the tsunami, where they did not have correspondents on the ground.

There are others, among them more recent examples, that illustrate the relevance of user-generated content in reporting the news. For instance, Hatte and Zhuravskaya (2023) noted a tendency of the US television outlets to provide more coverage of the conflict between Israel and Palestine when there is an increase in the content created by ordinary citizens on social media, such as platform X. This implies that the engagement of citizens in information production can spill over from the digital to a traditional media environment. Hatte and Zhuravskaya (2023) also learned that under the impact of social media and its availability in the conflict zone, ideological distinctions across various television stations tend to fade. When they looked into eight major US television networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, FOX, MSNBC, and Bloomberg) and compared their coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict with that of Al Jazeera America, a television news channel owned by a Qatari company called Al Jazeera Media Network, they noted that the content presented was similar with the absence of internet outages that would prevent social media activities.

The interruption of internet service resulted in a reduction in the number of tweets from the conflict zone. Social media also contributed to a more detailed coverage of events (Hatte & Zhuravskaya, 2023).

Citizen engagement with news can take diverse forms. There are subtle differences between individuals who stumble upon events and carelessly report about them and those who generate firsthand reportage and break the news online intentionally. In addition to that, some citizens choose to post news on social media, while others submit news tips, photographs, and videos of what they documented directly to news media. Stuart Allan drew a line between citizen witness and citizen journalist, describing the former as "people who find themselves on the scene of a crisis event—an accident, disaster, conflict or even in a warzone—who have the presence of mind to try to document what they're seeing" (Hájek et al., 2014, p. 176). Therefore, they are rather bystanders who happen to be at an event and take pictures and videos of what they see. On the other hand, according to Allan, there are people who choose to bear witness, and that "entails a moral commitment, where one endeavors to document what is transpiring the best one is able (truthful testimony) and thereby strive to uphold an ethical responsibility to others" (p. 177).

Another relevant thing to consider is the difference between what scholarly literature labels as citizen journalism and participatory journalism. Citizen journalism can act independently of news organizations, in the form of blogs, social media, or websites where ordinary individuals publish their stories directly, while participatory journalism somewhat limits their autonomy as it is facilitated by news organizations and involves the reproduction and moderation of citizen content (Nip, 2006; Lewis, 2010; Pantic, 2023). In other words, people can simply perform the role of citizen journalists by breaking the news on platform X from remote areas. As Allan noted, they can also engage in reporting by posting on their blogs about issues that lack local media coverage (Hájek et al., 2014, p. 176). However, when news media incorporate content posted on citizen blogs or platform X into news stories hosted on their websites, this practice aligns with what is referred to as participatory journalism. By embedding social media posts and blog entries into their articles, news organizations not only acknowledge the contributions of citizens to storytelling but also expand the scope of their reporting to include diverse perspectives.

Laura Oliver, the former Head of Audience Engagement at the *Guardian*, described user engagement as "shifting a member of the audience from someone who passively consumes a piece of news, or maybe a video, or an infographic, whatever it is, into taking an action" (Lawrence et al., 2018, p. 1228). News media offer numerous interactive features on their websites that encourage readers to engage with content. These opportunities include responding to polls, joining discussions on message boards and comment threads, contributing to blogs, and sending letters to the editor (Pantic, 2018; Thurman, 2008). Aside from that, users commonly react to news articles by liking, sharing, recommending, and commenting on them. There are news sites that even allow users to contribute their content to a website's sections specialized for that, with examples that include the BBC's "Have Your Say" and Times of India's application created for citizens to share stories called "Citizen Reporter" (Pantic, 2018). In addition to news websites, interaction between news media representatives and audiences also occurs on platforms such as Facebook and Apple News (Lawrence at al., 2018). Social media not only serve as distribution channels but also as spaces where journalists can communicate with audiences and feed on multimedia content posted by them on these platforms. YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook supply news organizations with content from people who have stories to share (Taft, 2014).

The value of user-produced online material is illuminated in its capacity to provide eyewitness accounts from diverse regions and about different types of events, especially crises and conflicts. According to Usher (2017), news organizations collect content produced by citizens in two ways: through passive and direct appropriation. Passive appropriation refers to instances when journalists search for user-generated content online, on social media, and other online platforms. This means that news organizations can use images, videos, and text that users made publicly available and repost them on their sites without asking the creators of the said content for consent. Given that such content is already available to a wider audience, its producers have indirectly consented to its potential reuse, including as a supplement to news stories. Such a practice corresponds to what Allan has described as "citizen witnessing" or instances where people post images and videos from events, not knowing that it will become part of news media stories (Hájek et al., 2014).

Citizen witnessing plays a particularly important role in covering breaking news and related events, especially in the areas where news organizations lack correspondents (Taft, 2014).

While passive appropriation implies there is indirect consent to content reuse, direct appropriation is reflected in activities through which news outlets initiate user content submission, such as by asking individuals to email them or reach out directly via social media. Direct appropriation also occurs when a news organization finds a post or an image online and then contacts the producer of the said content and asks for permission to repost it on their site. In the case of passive appropriation, citizen consent to have their opinions and information published is assumed as it is publicly available, and they might not be aware that what they had shared on the internet was later hosted on a news website. With direct appropriation, citizens willingly submit their stories to news organizations, being aware that it will get published if it passes the gates of the news organization (Usher, 2017). An example of direct appropriation includes the London bombings on July 7, 2005, a brutal terrorist attack that killed fifty-two people, which was also a milestone in participatory journalism. According to Taft (2014), this event perfectly depicted the relevance of user-generated content for breaking news. Right after the attack, the BBC started receiving information along with solicited footage and images from citizens to portray the event. In total, they received more than 1,000 images and more than 20,000 emails of the terrifying attacks that were not captured by news cameras (Taft, 2014).

Live Blogging and Gatekeeping

There are multiple ways for users to engage in storytelling on news websites, but one of the most popular is certainly through live blogging. In journalism, a live blog represents an online news format comprised of live updates, employed to cover events as they happen (Pantic et al., 2017; Thurman & Walters, 2013). This journalistic genre, which encourages deeper participation with news, places information in reverse chronological order, so readers learn about the most recent development regarding an event when they open the blog

(Thurman & Walters, 2013). The live blog is also recognizable as a news format that portrays events through multimedia elements, including text, embedded tweets and other social media posts, still images, graphs, and videos (Pantic et al., 2017). Live blogs are frequently utilized for covering breaking news events that allow readers to learn what is happening as the event unfolds (O'Mahony, 2014; Pantic et al., 2017; Thurman & Walters, 2013). As an illustration, the live blog format was utilized by news organizations to cover events such as the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, a terrifying terrorist attack that killed three and injured almost 300 people, and the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 that brought waves of refugees from this war-torn country to Europe (O'Mahony, 2014; Pantic & Pjesivac, 2019). Aside from that, live blogs can cover other events in motion that require some form of urgency. Those encompass sports events, award ceremonies, and elections (e.g., live updates on polling, vote counts, etc.). Recent examples include utilizing live blogs to cover presidential elections in real time across the news websites of the most relevant news organizations, among them CNN, the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, Fox News, MSNBC, and many international outlets, such as *Hindustan Times*, the *Guardian*, and the BBC. Therefore, live blogs are suitable for the online news ecology because they respond to one of its major requirements—immediacy. In fact, Thurman and Walters (2013) labeled live blogging as pivotal for digital journalism. As an event is running, a journalist who live blogs about it would add another update to the blog along with a time stamp, letting the reader know about the most recent development regarding the said event (Ng, 2013). Unlike traditional news articles seen both online and in print media, which present a static overview of an event, live blogs are designed to evolve with the story, offering minute-by-minute or periodic updates.

Journalists who live-blog about events curate information from multiple sources, including other websites and social media, attributing each piece of that information and adding links to it to the original source (Pantic et al., 2017). Live blogs are known for their participatory nature, as they have the capacity to accommodate diverse voices, including comments from readers, and create a dynamic interaction between live-blog creators and consumers (Thurman & Walters, 2013). Journalists who create live blogs have an open relationship with their readers (O'Mahony, 2014). It is evident that live blogs

nurture an interactive form of storytelling, through which readers contribute to event coverage with information and opinions (Pantic, 2020a). In fact, they rely on their readers to a great extent, deriving information from people who post firsthand accounts about events on social media and elsewhere (O'Mahony, 2014). Live blogs "represent a personification of networked, participatory journalism, which is based on user-generated content, information derived from various websites, social media such as Twitter and other sources" (Pantic, 2020a, p. 153).

Although journalists' daily routine entails observing what online crowds and prominent individuals are discussing on social media, they do not simply take the content they encounter on these platforms and embed it into live blogs or other news formats they use to cover events. One of the crucial elements of journalism, as discussed in Chapter 1, is placing facts into context, and that includes information distributed by ordinary individuals on the internet. In other words, news media do not just reuse and reshare the content taken from online platforms; rather, they provide context around citizen content. This is what distinguishes them from other information suppliers in a digitized ecosystem, among which are social media users who share what they have witnessed, learned, or heard about. As Usher (2017) noted, contextualizing citizen content "underscores the power of news organizations to ultimately shape how most news consumers experience citizen content" (p. 258). Furthermore, research about participatory journalism has shown that news outlets primarily engage readers in the domain where they react to already published content rather than allowing them to engage directly in news production (Lawrence et al., 2018; Pantic, 2018). Among the reasons for selectivity is the fact that journalists tend to deal with trolls online, or users who intentionally write offensive messages and make misleading claims, especially in the comment section (Wolfgang, 2018).

Practices that involve choosing what kind of user-generated content will be available to their own readers emphasize the gatekeeping role that news media perform in a digitized media ecosystem, as they create certain limits on user engagement in an attempt to maintain control over what becomes news (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Pantic, 2018). Gatekeeping highlights the tension in a digital news environment between openness and the dominance of news

organizations, often tempering the promise of deeper user engagements. Zeller and Hermida (2015), for instance, detected an enthusiasm for participatory journalism among a small group of digital journalists in Canada they interviewed in 2012. However, at the same time, journalists insisted on drawing a line between themselves and those who create amateur content, considering that the content produced professionally entails authenticating information. Similarly, a relative reluctance in allowing users to chime in during the news production process was detected in media outlets based in India, the United States, and the United Kingdom, considering that they had very limited space for audience-produced content (Pantic, 2018). According to the said study, there was a small number of sites that had sections specialized for content produced by citizens. In addition, while ordinary individuals can voice their opinions on diverse issues through comment threads, featured blogs and opinion pages on news sites are mostly reserved for journalists and elites. Although being persistent in pursuing their gatekeeping role can dampen the initial optimism surrounding user participation by restricting the scope of it, in the context of digital news literacy, this practice is likely to be perceived as desirable. News media are expected to deliver information that is accurate, trustworthy, and truthful, which is why they need to be vigilant when selecting what type of user-produced content will become part of news articles. Hence, when looking into social media content, journalists go through the verification process that allows them to determine what information is accurate and suitable to contribute to an extensive and balanced portrayal of an event. They filter through rumors, suspicious information, and trolling to choose what is relevant and make it available to their readership. By engaging in such practices, news organizations take part in safeguarding consumers who are vulnerable to susceptible information, which is particularly visible during crisis events. In these situations, people feel an instant thirst for information and instinctively turn to their preferred channels of communication to acquire it. Journalists, in turn, face immense pressure to report developments as soon as they learn something new about the event while simultaneously following the principles of their profession—to inspect and verify facts before they put them together in a report and deliver the news to their audiences.

However, the landscape of social media is vastly different from that of professional journalism. Unlike journalists, social media users have no obligation to share trustworthy information, which allows them to disseminate both facts and rumors with little oversight. Hence, posts shared by nonverified accounts, anonymous users, and other non-media sources should be approached with caution. It is also important to note that this type of content creation occurs outside the realm of traditional news organizations. Although posting on social media and commenting on what other users have to say reflects a form of engagement, it does not constitute participatory journalism. A notable example is the use of community notes on platform X. This feature allows X users to add context to posts. According to this social media platform, "contributors can leave notes on any post and if enough contributors from different points of view rate the note as helpful, the note will be publicly shown on a post" (About community notes on X, n.d., para 1). The goal of the notes is to battle misleading information online. Yet, the issue is that they rely on contributions from users who are not necessarily subject-matter experts. Therefore, the quality of the notes can vary significantly, and they may occasionally include misleading or incomplete information themselves, frequently impacted by ideological biases.

While community notes and other forms of user engagement on social media do not qualify as participatory journalism, this form of user-driven contributions can assist journalists in searching for information or cross-verification. In fact, gatekeeping, filtering, and fact-checking processes employed by professional media organizations help mitigate problems that have emerged from the growing reliance on social media for current events. Users can be more confident that the information coming from social media and reposted on news websites has gone through professional journalism scrutiny before publication. Gatekeeping, thus, determines what professionally crafted news will be accessible to audiences, influencing their perceptions of what is important, while news literacy helps news consumers understand decisions made in the gatekeeping process.

Ethical considerations that accompany the gatekeeping process are also reflected in preventing bias and accommodating diverse perspectives when

engaging in gatekeeping practices. Looking into opinion pages on news sites, media outlets evidently prefer giving voice to experts and their own staff (Pantic, 2018), leaving ordinary citizens to participate primarily through comment sections. This approach underscores not only the gatekeeping role but also the hierarchy of influence, where professional and elite perspectives dominate public discourse, leaving limited space for direct citizen contributions to the opinion landscape. Regardless of these limitations, developing news literacy will assist readers in determining which news organizations are inclined to produce biased news reports on major events and which maintain fairness and balance in reporting.

Building Trust and Increasing Engagement

Digital news literacy refers to the ability to evaluate news content in a digitized media ecology. That includes distinguishing between user-generated content embedded in news stories and posts produced by citizens that are hosted on platforms outside the news media spectrum. While there are independent sources we trust online and social media accounts that share relevant information, their content often lacks the rigorous verification process employed by professional news outlets. On the other hand, bias present in the news crafted by professional news organizations can impact our likelihood of trusting the information coming from such organizations, prompting some individuals to turn to independent sources for additional context. In such cases, it is crucial to cross-check the information from these sources against other sources that you deem relevant.

Understanding participatory journalism is not only important in the context of developing digital news literacy skills but also in grasping the complexity of the relationship between news producers and news consumers and how it has evolved over time. Participation in journalism means communicating with an audience, not to an audience. Citizen engagement with the news is described as "a mechanism to build or restore trust in news media and potentially to deepen loyalty with would-be subscribers or members" (Wenzel & Nelson, 2020, p. 515). Aside from using it to rebuild trust with

an audience, news organizations utilize audience engagement to foster civic dialogue, nurture brand loyalty, increase traffic to their sites, and make readers feel like they are a part of the community (Lawrence et al., 2018). They also engage readers in diverse stages of the news production process, including collecting, crafting, and disseminating information, because oftentimes they lack the resources to cover events, especially those outside their geographical zone (Hujanen, 2016; Taft, 2014). A free paper published in Helsinki, *Metro*, praises itself for devoted readers willing to take pictures at the request of this news organization to contribute to its storytelling, which is a practice also embraced by the leading paper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, that invites readers to contribute to its investigative journalism pieces (Hujanen, 2016). The BBC has used crowdsourcing many times to cover big events, from a US Airways emergency landing on the Hudson River in New York in 2009 to protests in Iran that same year and the Arab Spring, representing a series of anti-government protests in the Arab world that started at the end of 2010 in Tunisia. Protests in Iran erupted after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected as president in what protesters labeled as rigged elections, but considering that foreign correspondents were facing limited access to do proper coverage in a country where media freedoms are hardly existent, news media needed to rely primarily on gathering information from social media to understand what was happening (Taft, 2014).

Evidently, citizens play a vital role in both news manufacturing and dissemination. In the introduction of this book, I shared a story about a friend who first learned that the Taliban had taken control over Kabul not from the mainstream media, but from a man she met on a dating app who lived there at the time. And this is just one among numerous examples that illustrate how breaking news spreads via online platforms. In fact, there have been key milestones in the relatively short history of social media that highlight the relevance of its users in crafting original content and distributing it to a global audience. When the United States conducted an operation in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in which they killed the leader of the militant terrorist organization al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, the first reports of the said event emerged on Twitter. Specifically, an IT consultant, Sohaib Athar, who lived in Abbottabad at the time of bin Laden's assassination, started tweeting about

unusual activities happening in this Pakistani city (Olson, 2011). It was in the middle of the night when he posted the following tweet: "Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event)" (Athar, 2011). After that, he posted a few other tweets, describing what he heard near his place. His posts, which unknowingly documented the covert US operation, gained attention as the action unfolded. Athar had no clear understanding of what exactly was happening, and just like in the case of my friend's story, it was not until the official sources announced bin Laden's death that the entire world became fully aware of the said event. Athar later tweeted that he was surprised after he learned what happened in Abbottabad that he had unknowingly tweeted about: "Uh oh, now I am the guy who liveblogged the Osama raid without knowing it" (Olson, 2011, para. 4).

This type of live blogging took place outside the traditional realm of journalism, on a platform where anyone can create and publish content. Still, that does not diminish the relevance of journalism in such cases. Mainstream media play an important role in making citizen content more visible, ensuring that important narratives reach a wider audience (Usher, 2017). Beyond visibility, citizens also willingly participate in the context of journalism, as it enables them to engage in political debates and raise awareness about issues important to them. Aside from that, people also take advantage of news media that encourage citizen participation, as these opportunities allow them to connect with others, have an impact on their communities, and work on personal and professional development (Ahva, 2017). Citizen journalism gives voice to marginalized groups who can use this form of communication to share their perspectives and experiences.

News outlets have acknowledged the importance of fostering deeper audience engagement, as evidenced by the diverse strategies they employ to achieve this goal. Such efforts include hiring engagement specialists and incorporating software tools from audience engagement companies like Hearken, which help strengthen connections with their audiences (Schmidt et al., 2022; Wenzel & Nelson, 2020). Aside from utilization of digital tools, media outlets also organize events to accommodate in-person meetups with their readers, viewers, and listeners to enhance engagement and reinforce trust (Lawrence et al., 2018). These efforts are crucial in establishing an environment

where citizens can confide in news and assist media organizations in battling misinformation and fake news that pose a threat to democracy. By encouraging citizen participation, news organizations foster a more inclusive public discourse, ensuring that underrepresented voices are heard in the broader media landscape.

While citizen engagement is highly relevant in the process of preserving democracy and fighting false information, scholars have increasingly pointed out a gap between theory and practice. In recent years, we have learned that theorizing about participatory journalism as a means to boost engagement and build communities is more enthusiastic than the way things actually are in practice (Schmidt et al., 2022). Regardless of theoretical optimism, the real-world application of participatory journalism faces challenges due to both the reluctance of some media professionals to allow users to engage with the news production process and the lack of users' interest in being part of participatory journalism. One such example is participation in live blogs, earlier discussed in this chapter as a format that encourages user participation. Although live blogs by default incorporate users' social media posts and publish their comments in response to a rolling event, the vast majority of people are still unlikely to engage with this type of journalistic storytelling on a deeper level. A study that utilized a survey of live-blog readers focused on exploring citizen participation in live blogs showed that almost 80 percent of respondents claimed they never participated in live blogging, while others participated once a month or more often (Pantic, 2020b). This indicates that providing a platform through which ordinary individuals can contribute to event coverage with their information or opinions does not necessarily guarantee widespread engagement. Still, these findings present a somewhat more optimistic outlook on participatory journalism than earlier research that revealed even lower rates of audience involvement in storytelling. As an example, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when participatory journalism was taking baby steps, a mere 0.5 percent of unique visitors of the BBC contributed user-generated feedback through its designated participation section (Thurman, 2008). Clearly, participatory journalism has never been universally embraced by the public. Deeper engagement tends to be driven by individuals who are outspoken, more invested in news, and have a stake in an issue. Among these actors are

activists, community members, academics, and students, to name a few (Ahva, 2017). They are not professional journalists but rather amateur writers and reporters willing to engage by sharing their perspectives or information they possess in the form of text, photographs, and videos. News websites do have sections reserved for blogs and opinions; they predominantly serve as spaces for journalists and political elites to express their viewpoints, not for ordinary people (Pantic, 2018). This dynamic featured in a digitized media environment highlights the selective nature of participatory journalism, where small, vocal groups shape the media narrative along with powerful players reflected in professional journalists and prominent, official sources, while the majority of citizens remain passive consumers of media content.

Citizen journalism has undergone significant transformation since the first decade of the twenty-first century, when it first entered the media sphere. Usher (2017) noted that social media has become more sophisticated and that diverse platforms, including Facebook and Storyful, have tools that enable journalists to sort out content produced by citizens. At the same time, however, social media also presents numerous challenges. Evidently, these platforms have supplied citizens with opportunities to collect information, recommend articles, post comments on diverse issues, and disseminate news. At the same time, they have introduced obstacles for news organizations. The accessibility of the internet to a wider population has not translated into deeper or more meaningful engagement. Instead, the sheer volume of user-produced content, coupled with issues that arise with false content and fleeting audience attention, has complicated efforts to cultivate constructive public discourse. If we delved further into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we could detect that the original enthusiasm about user engagement in news production began evaporating. For instance, Karlsson et al. (2015) noted that there was an increase in comments that news items on Swedish news sites allowed from 2007 to 2010, followed by a significant decline three years afterward. According to these authors, the reason news media were less likely to invite readers into the discussion from 2010 to 2013 could be due to their lack of willingness to facilitate this type of interaction on their sites. The problem is that the input from an audience is not necessarily newsworthy and substantial, which is especially evident in the comment section that attracts

a fraction of people inclined to post hateful comments, thus reducing the value of this type of engagement (Lawrence et al., 2018). Some media outlets, among them Switzerland-based German-language daily newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung, have detected the increase in comments over the years but the decline in their quality (Lawrence et al., 2018). This has dampened the original optimism surrounding citizen engagement with news. Another study that utilized in-depth interviews with journalists working in multiple media organizations in the United States showed that the practice of engaging readers in news on a deeper level has been normalized, as citizens supply journalists with fresh ideas and perspectives (Schmidt et al., 2022). The issue, however, just like with previous studies (e.g., Pantic, 2020b; Thurman, 2008), is that the optimism and the openness of journalists to encourage audience participation were confronted with the audience's lack of willingness to participate. Schmidt et al. (2022) and other scholars have noted that insufficient human resources and financial concerns also affect the levels of participation, as they can accommodate user engagement to the extent to which these two allow. For instance, they might lack financial means to incorporate software and tools that would foster user participation or lack staff that would interact with audiences, either by communicating with them on social media, moderating comments, or dealing with other types of user-generated content. Therefore, lack of resources limits the newsroom's collaborative potential with its audience. In addition, as previously noted, newsrooms still try to preserve their authority over news production, so they predominantly let readers share stories on social media or react to articles by posting comments to them, while news production is still primarily in the domain of professional journalists' work (Pantic, 2018).

Having spent twelve years working in the media industry, followed by nearly as much time conducting research in digital journalism with a particular emphasis on citizen engagement with news, I have concluded that participatory journalism represents a vital aspect of digital news literacy. Specifically, I am confident that digital news literacy should extend beyond simply equipping people with the skills to critically assess news. Instead, it should emphasize the active involvement of citizens in the information production process. For instance, ordinary individuals who use diverse platforms online can spread

awareness regarding false content online and participate in preventing dark participation. They can assist news organizations directly or indirectly by flagging the content that is misleading, thus contributing to a cleaner news ecology. By engaging in participatory journalism, individuals not only enhance their ability to evaluate diverse types of content but also develop a deeper awareness of the importance of digital news literacy and the responsibilities that arise with creating and disseminating information in the digital age. In this way, they can contribute to the process of fostering a more informed and proactive digital society.

6

Artificial Intelligence and Journalism

Definition of AI

Artificial intelligence has an immense political, societal, and economic impact, influencing the very fabric of human interaction. It is a phenomenon that arose under the impact of the rapid growth of new technologies, fundamentally reshaping the ways humans think, learn, and work. This revolutionary technology encompasses machine learning, automation, and data processing (Beckett, 2019). From automating routine tasks to enhancing creative processes, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is redefining productivity and innovation. It has increasingly permeated almost every sphere of human activity, and journalism is no exception to its growing influence. As AI continues to reshape various industries, it is transforming the way information is gathered, produced, and distributed.

Simon (2024) defined AI as "the act of computationally simulating human activities and skills in narrowly defined domains, typically the application of machine learning approaches through which machines learn from data and/or their own performance" (p. 11). This definition highlights AI's core functionality, which is its ability to mimic cognitive processes by feeding on large amounts of data to learn and perform various tasks. Unlike traditional computer programs that follow explicitly coded instructions, AI systems grow through experience, refining their capabilities and enhancing performance over time. AI is developing rapidly, recording an increase in use to automate processes across diverse industries globally, from healthcare, where it helps in identifying diseases and designing tailored treatments, to creativity by generating art and writing.

At the time this book was written, AI as a phenomenon had been discussed widely, not only in the tech industry but also among the general population. Conversations about its potential risks and ethical implications spread across various spheres of society, sparking both excitement and concern. However, despite its growing presence in the public discourse, the understanding regarding its capabilities and future utilization remained relatively limited, and people's perceptions of it varied. Strictly speaking, we could not tell at that point what this thing could do and whether it could reach the point of gaining conciseness. And due to its complex and revolutionizing nature, its relationship with digital news literacy, along with the question of how these technologies will be employed in the media industry, remained unpredictable. Advantages and disadvantages of AI had been discussed, with major concerns directed at AI's potential detrimental impact on democracy and contribution to the erosion of trust in public institutions, including news media.

Democracy is reflected in people's right to choose those who will serve them (Jungherr, 2023). Previous chapters discussed the importance of exposure to credible, accurate information for citizens when they are making decisions about their lives. One of the issues that arises with the integration of AI in news ecology is that it could be used to create and disseminate fake news and other types of disinformation intentionally designed to deceive people. However, the outcome of using AI for false content creation can also have the opposite effect from what the creators desired. Jungherr (2023) explains that the reason for this is "when the prevalence of unreliable or misleading information in digital communication environments becomes evident, the premium for reliable information rises" (p. 6). This optimistic, but not unrealistic perspective suggests that people will naturally turn to professionally crafted news they can access on credible and neutral websites.

AI is being used in the domain of government-citizen relations, where local governments utilize the tools provided by these technologies to deliver services more efficiently and facilitate interaction with people (Duberry, 2022). Hence, AI is exerting a profound influence on democratic systems, reshaping the information environment, especially within the news media spectrum. AI technologies are driving significant changes in how news is created and disseminated, leading to a restructuring of the news market. Powerful digital

platforms, such as Google, Facebook, and X, are now dominant players in information production and distribution, leveraging AI to streamline this process. As an illustration, Google nowadays supplies users with generated text based on their search, deriving information from multiple sources. Platform X has a digital assistant, Grok, that can be utilized to summarize posts related to trending topics that its users consume. This reliance on information and news summaries generated by algorithms has an impact not only on user experiences but also on the visibility of original journalistic reporting. News summaries delivered by big tech companies reduce traffic to small and medium-sized media organizations that rely to a certain extent on those readers who visit their sites via links that search engines suggest to them based on their search prompts (Jungherr, 2023). There is already a concern for small news organizations that they might be falling behind other media companies in the adoption of new technologies, including AI (Beckett, 2019). Hence, the practice that allows digital giants to provide summarized text and divert users from visiting news websites creates further problems for these media outlets as they cannot monetize web traffic and thus fund their operations, including producing news related to relevant issues in the area of economy and politics. It also represents one of many reasons why the integration of AI in newsrooms is seen both as an opportunity to increase work efficiency and as a tool that presents a multitude of challenges to journalism work. Simon (2024) suggested that journalism experts and practitioners who argue that AI could aid in work efficiency, taking care of the time-consuming work and allowing journalists to focus on "creative and strategic tasks," while those skeptical of it believe that AI's potential to increase productivity and work efficiency is limited (p. 15).

Utilization of AI in the News

De-Lima-Santos and Ceron (2022) identified seven key areas of utilization of AI. They include (1) machine learning; (2) natural language processing; (3) speech recognition; (4) expert systems; (5) planning, scheduling, and optimization; (6) robotics; and (7) computer vision (p. 18). In the news industry, the most commonly used one is machine learning, followed by

computer vision, planning, scheduling, and optimization (de-Lima-Santos & Ceron, 2022). Evidently, journalism practitioners have acknowledged the importance of adapting to new technologies and found many useful ways to utilize AI at work. Some specific examples include having AI assistance in searching and selecting archival material, dealing effectively with large data sets, deriving key aspects of financial reports, transcribing interviews, summarizing lengthy texts, and so on (Simon, 2024). One of the common areas of AI use is machine learning, which, for instance, can help news organizations understand their audiences and their behavior better. As an illustration, an American newspaper with an online platform, the *Wall Street Journal*, utilized machine learning technologies to track users' activities and create an adaptive paywall that determines how many articles readers can access for free based on their behavior on the site (de-Lima-Santos & Ceron, 2022; McCarthy, 2018). This is one of the many benefits of machine learning that corresponds to one of the major news media goals: boosting user engagement. Social media platforms also use machine learning algorithms to collect data from users and then deliver content to them based on the generated data. Although this is helpful to users as it allows them to focus on what is relevant to them from an abundance of information, the utilization of machine learning algorithms could also be problematic because they result in filter bubbles, exposing people to content based on their preferences and beliefs while keeping them away from other sources of information they need to be properly informed (Duberry, 2022).

News organizations operate differently from social media. While platforms such as X or Facebook prioritize personalized content delivery, news outlets need to balance between their efforts to attract news consumers and adherence to journalistic principles, such as accuracy and transparency, which were discussed in Chapter 1. Their goal is to inform the public about significant events while also ensuring that their content retains audiences. Algorithms and AI have the potential to benefit newsrooms, especially by enhancing efficiency and enabling in-depth analysis of audience preferences. Unlike the filter bubbles created by social media algorithms, newsrooms can utilize AI to enhance the user experience in a more balanced way, through content selection that is tailored to users' needs while simultaneously offering a vast

array of perspectives. One such example is a project designed to enhance user experience implemented by the British daily the *Times* and the Sunday newspaper *Sunday Times*. Specifically, these news brands of the media company News UK developed their own algorithm to deliver content to users tailored to their preferences (Davies, 2018). This AI product, a "digital butler" called James (Journey Automated Messaging for Higher Engagement though Self-Learning) has enhanced the user experience by learning what readers are likely to consume and at what time, predicting what news content they are likely to engage with, and then sending individualized newsletters with such content to them ("The Complete Guide to Habit Formation," 2023; Tobitt, 2019). Developed by software company Twipe and supported by Google's Digital Initiative, James helped the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* cut their digital subscriber cancellation by half during a trial period (Tobitt, 2019, para. 1). Mike Migliore, head of customer value at News UK, explained that because news content is personalized, "the readers see more value in their subscription and are less likely to cancel it" (Kunova, 2019, para. 7).

Aside from machine learning, computer vision has also been utilized in newsrooms. De-Lima-Santos and Ceron (2022) listed multiple examples of such use, including the utilization of the *New York Times*'s "computer vision algorithms to estimate 3D poses of sports athletes at live events" and the use of these technologies in combination with satellite images by Reuters "to track urban expansion in the South China Sea" (p. 21). Planning, scheduling, and optimization could be used for automated story production. Prominent players in the mass media market, such as the Associated Press (AP) and Bloomberg, have employed these technologies to automate a certain number of articles covering business and sports stories for years (Ricca, 2023; "Using Bloomberg Automated News," 2022). In fact, the AP entered the field of robotic journalism almost a decade before the debate on AI had tucked into the societal pores. In 2014, the AP partnered with a tech company, Automated Insights, to design software that assists in writing stories covering investment and college sports or National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sporting events (Mullin, 2015; Peiser, 2019). Following this, Bloomberg developed an AI-powered system called Cyborg that analyzes massive financial data and translates it into news story drafts (Mullin, 2016; Peiser, 2019). It has the capacity to "dissect a

financial report the moment it appears and spit out an immediate news story that includes the most pertinent facts and figures" (Peiser, 2019, para. 3). Although these advancements have streamlined the news production process, they have also sparked concerns about robotics potentially replacing human roles in journalism. These worries may have influenced the Editor in Chief of Bloomberg, John Micklethwait, to highlight the relevance of human journalism work in crafting news stories when he introduced Cyborg, the company's new tool, to the news organization's staff. According to a report by Poynter's editor Benjamin Mullin (2016), in a memo sent in 2016 to Bloomberg employees, Micklethwait stated,

> Why do we need you, if the basic idea is to get computers to do more of the work? One irony of automation is that it is only as good as humans make it. That applies to both the main types of automated journalism. In the first, the computer will generate the story or headline by itself. But it needs humans to tell it what to look for, where to look for it and to guarantee its independence and transparency to our readers. In the second sort, the computer spots a trend, delivers a portion of a story to you and in essence asks the question: Do you want to add or subtract something to this and then publish it? And it will only count as Bloomberg journalism if you sign off on it. For instance, the computer might be telling you that McDonald's share price has fallen, while the price of beef has risen. It is up to you to decide whether it is worth writing about this—just as it was up to you to tell the computer to be on the lookout for moves in beef prices. (Mullin, 2016, para. 12)

Although AI has entered a few newsrooms in some form in the second decade of the twentieth century, it was not until 2024 that it became a hot topic. In fact, it has remained a trending topic not only among information technology and media experts but in society in general, as its utilization started extending beyond the professional framework with the influx of people using it to simplify daily tasks. What preceded this was November 2022, marked by the invention of ChatGPT, an AI-powered virtual assistant that generates text based on users' prompts, which started becoming widely utilized in 2024. Hence, employing AI to create writing pieces is no longer a privilege reserved for big media companies with the resources to invest in cutting-edge software that makes the news creation and dissemination process more efficient. With

their ability to produce writing pieces, versatile AI tools such as ChatGPT are commonly used by business professionals to draft emails and reports, marketing specialists to create ads, students to improve writing skills, and journalists to generate article drafts and explore new angles for stories.

While they have contributed to work efficiency and transformed how we approach communication, AI tools have also raised concerns that warrant careful consideration, such as their potential misuse, impact on employment, and ethical implications. Various risks accompany the utilization of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT in journalism, including potential errors and misinformation, bias that could emerge from the data this chatbot feeds on, but also a concern that AI could displace journalists and dehumanize their work with reporting that lacks human touch and perspective. Scholars Breazu and Katsos (2024) were particularly interested in determining what kind of discourse could be generated by LLMs and how they differ from human discourse. Specifically, they compared the content produced by ChatGPT-4 on Roma migrants from Eastern Europe in 2016, when the United Kingdom was preparing for the referendum on European Union (EU) membership, with the articles published by the UK newspapers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*, which had polarizing views on Brexit. While the British right-leaning tabloid the *Daily Mail* wanted to see the United Kingdom out of the EU or was, in other words, embracing Brexit, a left-leaning newspaper, the *Guardian*, was clearly advocating for the United Kingdom to remain a member of this supranational European organization, which put them on two opposite spectrums during the referendum. Among social and economic topics, the immigration of Roma people to the United Kingdom was a particularly sensitive issue that created a further divide between those who were pro and against immigration, which translated into pro and against EU membership. In their research, Breazu and Katsos (2024) fed ChatGPT-4 with forty-five articles from the *Daily Mail* and twenty from the *Guardian*. They learned that ChatGPT replicated less than one-third of the headlines produced by the tabloid newspaper, suggesting that its algorithm removed sensationalistic and stereotype-promoting phrases against Roma people, providing a more objective version of the issues and events portrayed in the selected articles. The headlines created by the *Guardian*, on the other hand, were more in line with ChatGPT's produced headlines.

This alignment, however, suggests that the AI model is trained or designed to remove certain perspectives from the content it generates (Breazu & Katsos, 2024). The study authors concluded that ChatGPT possesses artificial sociality and communicates respectively, advising its users on diverse topics and assisting them in creating unbiased content.

Does this mean that ChatGPT, with its ability to recognize and remove stereotype-induced content and create a report that resembles what journalism should strive for—neutral, balanced reporting that accurately portrays events—will replace human journalists? While these capabilities are impressive, Beckett (2019) argues that such a replacement is unlikely to happen as AI still lacks the human touch reflected in the judgment and insights of journalists that are derived from their journalism knowledge, experience, as well as social and emotional intelligence. In other words, journalists often bring to their reporting duties a cultural understanding, empathy, and ethical reasoning that AI cannot replicate. Their job entails engaging with people directly and responding to unexpected situations in ways that machines cannot do. Additionally, human emotions underpin many journalistic stories, especially feature pieces, which remain beyond the scope of AI. This is also evident from the previously referenced Micklethwait's memo to Bloomberg staff and remarks by other news media representatives, including Lisa Gibbs, the director of news partnerships for the AP, who emphasized the importance of key journalistic traits that foster good journalism. According to her, "The work of journalism is creative, it's about curiosity, it's about storytelling, it's about digging and holding governments accountable, it's critical thinking, it's judgment—and that is where we want our journalists spending their energy" (Peiser, 2019, para. 10).

Aside from ChatGPT, a virtual assistant developed by OpenAI that helps users in writing and brainstorming ideas, there are many other AI tools, such as Jasper, Pinpoint, and Vetted, used in journalism and other industries. As AI tools become more advanced, their role in journalism is likely to grow, with more sophisticated data analysis, multimedia content creation, and audience engagement methods. One of the main reasons for AI use in newsrooms, according to a survey of 116 digitally savvy journalists in seventy-two news organizations from thirty-two countries, is work efficiency, followed by

delivering more relevant content to users and improving business efficiency (Beckett, 2019). With respect to the areas in which they use AI, journalists stated that they use it for the gathering, production, and distribution of news. AI usage for news gathering includes a vast array of activities, from generating story ideas to event monitoring, while news production entails content creation, editing, and packaging for diverse platforms, and distribution allows for the usage of algorithms to personalize content, analyze user behavior, and market content (p. 20). When asked what would be helpful in addressing challenges of AI in the future, 46 percent of respondents listed training and education about AI technologies in newsrooms, along with literacy that will allow journalists to develop skills to better deal with data and automation projects (Beckett, 2019). As many as "43% cited the need for recruiting people with new skills" (p. 70). Hence, fostering AI literacy and drafting people with specialized skills are essential steps for newsrooms to leverage the potential of AI.

News Literacy and AI

The boom of AI technologies has brought about a host of challenges, including the ease with which false content can be produced and shared. Clearly, the current digital media environment is overpopulated by synthetic media—content that has either been modified or entirely generated using AI tools. Examples of such media include deepfakes, face-swapping technologies, and speech synthesis, (where speeches are artificially produced to sound like humans), as well as diverse types of filters that alter videos, adjust color, lighting, or add visual effects. Lim (2023) described deepfakes as "visual (e.g., image, video) manipulation using artificial intelligence and deep learning technologies to create fake events" (p. 2). Although these technologies are invaluable in creative industries and might have practical uses, AI-generated fakery raises significant concerns due to its potential to be weaponized for the spread of false information, therefore causing further distortion of societal trust in digital media. Oftentimes, deepfakes are used in audiovisual formats to imitate people (Twomey et al., 2023). As a result of digital manipulation, individuals featured in deepfake images and videos are depicted as doing or

saying something they never did. Frequently, deepfake images contain errors and inconsistencies. However, these are not immediately noticeable, and with advancements in deepfake technologies, spotting these errors will become even more challenging.

Deepfakes have already demonstrated significant implications across various domains, including security, privacy, business, and societal trust. A notable example of how far deepfake content generation can go occurred in spring 2023, when a photo of black smoke allegedly depicting an explosion near the Pentagon, the United States Department of Defense's headquarters in Virginia, was posted on Twitter, resulting in a temporary decline in the stock market (Bond, 2023; Marcelo, 2023). The image was not real, yet it was convincing enough to spark panic, deceive thousands of its viewers, and make investors believe the threat was credible. A social analysis firm, Cybra, found that nearly 4,000 accounts, including those verified, had referenced the image, contributing to its spread (Saliba, 2023). It is important to note that since Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022, he introduced multiple changes, one of them being the criteria for obtaining a blue checkmark, which signals that an account has been verified. Previously reserved for organizations and official sources, such as government representatives and celebrities, the blue tick has become available to anyone who subscribes to the Twitter Blue service. This practice might have brought additional confusion among the platform's users, making it difficult to distinguish legitimate accounts from misleading sources, which might have been the case with alleged Pentagon smoke. Sharing the image prompted multiple media outlets outside the United States to report the story as if it were real, yet US officials and experts debunked it soon after as false, which revived the stock market (Bond, 2023; Marcelo, 2023).

Deep-learning technologies have also been used massively in the creation of deepfakes in the Russia-Ukraine war, highlighting the growing issues posed by misinformation in twenty-first-century conflicts. Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the following months, social media became flooded with diverse types of false information depicting the conflict in Eastern Europe. Among the most worrisome developments was the use of AI technologies to create fake images, videos, and audio recordings. These digital fabrications portrayed both President of Russia Vladimir Putin and President of Ukraine

Volodymyr Zelenskyy saying or doing things that never happened. Twomey et al. (2023) noted that the most notable examples were fake videos depicting the alleged surrender of Putin and Zelenskyy. One such video appeared in March 2022, showing Zelenskyy calling Ukrainian soldiers to put down their arms. The video contained some evident errors, such as the Ukrainian president's strange accent and not fully matching lip sync, prompting viewers to debunk it as inauthentic (Allyn, 2022). Another deepfake posted that same month, just of better quality, portrayed Putin allegedly ending the war by announcing that Russia had reached peace with Ukraine (Evon, 2022). According to Twomey et al. (2023), those deepfakes were of "poor quality"; however, "had these deep fakes been believed, they may have had wide-reaching consequences for the war" (p. 14).

Experts have proposed multiple steps to detect deep fakes. When evaluating an image, it is crucial to analyze not only the individual featured in it but also their surroundings. For instance, shadow and lighting should be consistent, as oftentimes it happens that "the subject is in clear focus and appears convincingly lifelike but elements in the backdrop might not be so realistic or polished" (Chan & Swenson, 2024, para. 10). Hence, unrealistic shadows or blurry backgrounds can reveal the synthetic nature of deepfakes. On the other hand, specific signs related to the individual in the picture include inconsistencies in their facial features or irregularities in skin texture. In the digital spaces, there are numerous face swap applications, among them Aitubo, Photoleap, and Reface, that allow users to swap faces in photos and videos. Experts contend that users should consider this when investigating the facial skin tone and edges of the face. This suggests that an AI-generated image is more likely to have blurry than sharp face edges and that the facial skin tone will not fully match the body (Chan & Swenson, 2024, para. 11). Inconsistencies are also likely to be detected with the rest of the head, as skin tone might differ, considering that another face has been inserted into it. With respect to video, it is especially important to investigate to what extent the individual's lip movement matches the audio incorporated in it. In the case of the deepfake portraying Putin ending the war, a real video of the Russian president was used, but the edited version had a different story coming out of Putin's mouth than the original one. Although most of the video matched

up with the sound, it was evident that the audio was fabricated, especially "during portions of the video where the real Putin is silent, and the fake Putin is speaking" (Evon, 2022, para. 10). In addition to that, the fabricated video appeared a bit blurry in comparison to the original video that was used to generate the deepfake. One more element to look into, as suggested by Henry Ajder, an expert in generative AI, is teeth to see specifically if they are clear and match the teeth that the person in the video has in real life (Chan & Swenson, 2024).

Additionally, it is crucial to apply other digital news literacy strategies discussed earlier in the book, including looking into the context and questioning whether something seems off or suspicious. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, in fact, proposes several steps in detecting deepfakes online, which are in line with the checklist developed by Patterson et al. (2019). These steps assist readers in the information verification process, as elaborated on in greater detail in Chapter 3. Two key steps discussed by Poynter include examining the original source that posted a suspicious video and searching for key words to inspect what other relevant sources reported on the same issue portrayed in the said video (Williams, 2023). The Poynter further suggests that videos designed to dupe people might appear edited, "seemingly unexplainable," containing "awkward gaps" and portraying "a public figure doing something that seems exaggerated, unrealistic, or not in character" (para. 29–30).

One of the most prominent newspapers in the United States, the *Washington Post*, launched a project in 2019, "The Fact Checker's Guide to Manipulated Video," with the aim to help identify video manipulations in a digitized media environment. Within the project, there is a page on the newspaper's website that lists examples of manipulated visuals and explains different terms related to falsified videos. Examples displayed on the page include both video manipulations that require and do not need to utilize AI to deceive people. On the page, three broad video categories have been identified, including "footage taken out of context, deceptively edited or deliberately edited" ("Seeing Isn't Believing," n.d., para. 1). This landing page on the *Washington Post* website shows how each category is broken into subcategories, so videos taken out of context involve (1) misrepresentation, when the video itself is not altered, but it is presented to include inaccurate information, such as wrong dates, and (2)

isolation, when a clip has been derived from a longer video and accompanied by a false narrative that does not give the full picture of the event. What is common for misinterpreted footage and isolated clips is that they are not digitally altered; yet, the way such videos are presented to an audience usually either does not have or represents falsely "the context in which events occurred" (Kessler, 2019, para. 9).

An example of misrepresentation is a video that appeared during the January 2025 fires in Palisades and Altadena, allegedly showing people looting houses in these Los Angeles County areas. One of the people in the video was filmed on the street carrying a bag, while two others were taking a television out of a house. When a fact-checking organization, Logically Facts, inspected the story, they learned that the video was created by a television station, KTLA, to show people's preventative evacuation in Altadena due to wildfires (Kulsum, 2025). Although there were looters in the fire-affected areas of Los Angeles who were taking advantage of the situation, the video that went viral on platform X showed friends of the people who were trying to save some belongings from their homes before they got affected by wildfires. The people in the video that went viral were misidentified as looters because the entire story was taken out of context and a false description was added to it. Another example of misrepresentation is a video shared by an anti-Islam group to portray violent riots of Muslim refugees in an area of Paris in February 2017. However, this was not true, considering that the video was unrelated to the refugees, as it portrayed demonstrations that broke out in France after allegations that a police officer raped a young Black man (Evon, 2017). Although the video was real, it was placed in a different context and thus misinterpreted.

Other out-of-context footage is illuminated in isolated short clips, those taken out from longer videos. An example of isolation is an earlier discussed clip that features President Biden at a commemoration in France, appearing as though he was about to sit on an imaginary chair. This misleading impression arose because the video of Biden and the chair was cut just before he sat down on an actual chair. Another instance portrays a situation in which Stephen Strasburg, now a former American professional baseball pitcher who played for the Washington Nationals, allegedly refused to shake President Donald Trump's hand during the team's visit to the White House. The isolated clip

posted on Twitter showed how Strasburg turned to the other side when Trump extended his hand. However, the original video posted on the *Washington Post*'s fact-checker's guide page clearly shows that Strasburg turned to hug his teammates, after which he shook the president's hand ("Seeing Isn't Believing," n.d.). Strasburg himself debunked the story by responding to a tweet with the isolated clip, labeling it as fake news (McDonald, 2019).

The next level of digital manipulation is deceptive editing, which includes omission and splicing, when segments from videos get removed or rearranged. In these instances, viewers cannot get the full picture of what happened, which leaves them misinformed. Both editing out portions of or cutting out videos and merging certain segments of videos change the story ("Seeing Isn't Believing," n.d., para. 1). Omitting portions of a video entails keeping an audience away from relevant information that will allow them to fully grasp what is happening. Similarly, rearranging clips and quotes might provide a completely different context and meaning than intended. President Biden, again, was frequently featured in the manipulated digital content that involved omission and splicing, with the primary focus being his age. In 2024, Biden attended a Group of 7 summit, after which an edited video and images of him appeared online, depicting him wandering around. The edited version was shared by conservative outlets, while the additional video material shows that Biden was giving a thumbs-up to the paratroopers at the event (Glueck et al., 2024). Yet, Biden was not the only subject of manipulation. According to the *Washington Post*, there were misleading videos during the 2020 presidential elections created by Biden's team to defeat Trump. Among them is a campaign ad video Biden posted on Twitter stating, "We can't sit by and lose this country to Donald Trump. Today, we take it back—together," which, according to analysis by the *Post*'s Meg Kelly, contains certain digital manipulations. What she detected in her analysis could be labeled as splicing, considering that various quotes and segments were rearranged into one video or, what Kelly described as, "a montage of intentionally unflattering clips of President Trump" (Kelly, 2020, para. 6). Thus, Donald Trump was quoted saying, "coronavirus, this is their new hoax," when this represented two different clips from the same campaign rally in South Carolina, where Trump mentioned both "coronavirus" and "this is their new hoax," just not in the same sentence (para. 7).

A similar phenomenon occurs with the malicious transformation of footage, a third category identified by the *Washington Post* that encompasses two subcategories, doctoring and fabrication. Doctoring refers to diverse types of digital manipulations, from altering the original video to change its speed to cropping it or dubbing its audio. One such example is a video of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in which she delivered a speech at a conference in a way that made her look drunk. The video posted on Facebook, which, according to the *Washington Post*, had more than 47,000 shares and 2.4 million views, was manipulated in a way that made her seem to speak slowly and sound slurred ("Pelosi Videos Manipulated to Make Her Appear Drunk," 2019). With respect to fabricated videos, the level of manipulation becomes even more advanced. Using AI tools, creators of such content can stimulate realistic audio and alter backgrounds, making a prominent individual deliver a speech or engage in an activity that has never occurred. This practice falls into the category of deepfakes, a concerning form of false information. Examples of such videos include the previously mentioned digital manipulations in which first Zelenskyy and then Putin announced surrender. Other forms of video manipulations may or may not involve the use of AI, while deepfakes by default rely on AI tools to be produced.

If relying on one's own knowledge, cross-referencing, and common sense do not work, then using AI tools that help detect AI-generated photographs and videos might help. There are multiple available AI tools; the problem is that they are neither widely accessible nor perfect. Ahead of the US presidential elections, OpenAI, an American artificial intelligence organization founded in 2015 by Elon Musk and several other businessmen, launched software to identify content that is produced by DALL-E, an image-generator tool that turns users' ideas into pictures. The tool had its limitations, as it was not created to detect images designed by other AI image generators (Metz & Hsu, 2024, para. 4). Another deepfake detection tool is Sensity, an application that allows its users to upload videos, audios, and images for a quick assessment. Similarly, a California-based tech company, Intel, introduced a platform in 2022 called FakeCatcher, aimed at detecting falsified video. The company claims that FakeCatcher delivers "results in milliseconds" with a "96 percent accuracy rate" ("Intel Introduces Real-Time Deepfake Detector," 2022, para.

1). Finally, there is DuckDuckGoose, a deepfake detection product designed for businesses to prevent fraud and identify media manipulations. While there are numerous other applications to detect falsified content, the problem is that the quality of deepfakes continues to improve, and even with cutting-edge technologies capable of detecting them, these increasingly sophisticated visual manipulations can still deceive people and cause harm to society.

To sum up, artificial intelligence does represent both an invaluable and dangerous tool for modern society. While it has capabilities to revolutionize industries and enhance productivity, it also poses significant risks due to its potential for misuse and ethical concerns. AI is becoming increasingly prevalent in many industries, including journalism, but like in other fields, opinions differ on its impact. On the one hand, there are experts and practitioners who believe that AI will significantly free up journalists, allowing them to focus on more creative and strategic tasks while the technology takes care of the grunt work. Others are more skeptical, arguing that AI's impact on productivity is likely to be more limited.

In the domain of news consumption, where audiences are not expected to adhere to any professional standards as journalists are, the situation becomes more complex. False videos and photographs have been populating digital spaces in which content has been consumed for years. These deceptive materials spread easily, reaching millions across the globe. The danger coming from deepfakes lies not only in their ability to convincingly mimic reality through the sophisticated technologies they use but also in their capacity to distort perception, making people believe that authentic content is fake. As Twomey et al. (2023) illustrated, in a situation where, for instance, "a politician is faced with compromising video evidence, they could deny a factual incriminating video of themselves as a deepfake" (p. 22).

To fully harness the benefits of artificial intelligence, it is critical to promote ethical AI practice and establish clear guidelines on how to use it. Improving industries without compromising their standards and integrity is crucial. These issues can only be resolved with a collaborative effort from technologists, policymakers, and media platforms. The key problem with AI technologies is their rapid development, which makes today's advice on managing their use

and potential misuse potentially irrelevant in the future. Regardless of the AI tools that are being developed to fight AI misuse, one thing remains certain: thinking critically, looking at the bigger picture, and cross-referencing sources will continue to represent solid strategies in detecting AI-produced content, even as it makes significant advancements.

Conclusion

At a Friendsgiving party in Manhattan, a fellow running friend and I started chatting about our shared appreciation for Citi bikes in New York City. We hop on them frequently to zip from one location to another, avoiding the subway, buses, and cars whenever possible. In that conversation, she asked if I wore a helmet on my rides, to which I instantly responded, "Yes, most of the time." It took me by surprise to see the friend's reaction to my answer to her—I could tell she was consternated. "You need to wear it every time. I would never sit on a bike without a helmet," she said.

Her reaction was understandable. I am certainly aware of the risks I take every time I choose not to wear a helmet when I hop on a Citi bike. But my friend had seen firsthand what happens when that risk results in serious consequences. While working as a trauma nurse in an emergency care unit, she witnessed the horrific outcomes of bike accidents. That evening, when we finished a cherry pie that we had been eating while chatting, she graphically described severe brain injuries some of her patients had suffered after falling off a bike. Her words were unsettling, but I should have known the dangers of my occasionally mindless behavior, considering that I once suffered a head trauma as a teenager due to a bike accident in which I was—you guess well—not wearing a helmet. My friend's vivid portrayals of multiple traumas she had seen at the emergency room (ER) where she worked were not only chilling but they also reminded me of my own traumatic experience. She said a bike ride without a helmet is something she would never do because of her job. Then she turned to me and asked, "What is it that you would never do because of the work you do?"

The response to this question popped up instantly. I responded, "I would never share any information from a source I am not familiar with without verifying the said information." You might think that this is nothing in comparison to what my friend has shared. After all, falling off a bike does

not seem to be comparable to sharing misinformation on social media. Now, I want you to imagine a situation in which someone shares a post on social media that claims, "Research shows that in 99 percent of cases, a biker hit by a car survives." This statement is, of course, entirely false; yet, as we learned in previous chapters, it can spread easily like any other misinformation and disinformation. Furthermore, false claims may even encourage people to ride recklessly, including not wearing a helmet while on a bike, which my friend would consider very dangerous.

While I was working on the final pages of this book, there was not a day when I did not see another example of fake news, video splicing, or statements taken out of context to create misconceptions on social networking sites, especially platform X. It was the beginning of 2025, and the United States faced the unexpected—the outbreak of measles, a viral infection that had been eliminated by the end of the twentieth century. How come we see its comeback in the twenty-first century when we thought it had been eradicated, and when the focus should now be on developing vaccines for other dangerous infections and diseases? In this book, it was inevitable to discuss vaccine-related topics, considering that they are susceptible to misinformation and that its rapid spread has contributed to the anti-vaxxer narrative on social media. As vaccination rates started declining due to false representations of their efficacy and the unestablished connection between vaccines and autism, we have faced an outbreak of measles that we initially thought was gone for good. Some parents' decision not to vaccinate their children against this infection that can be serious for them, points at the dangerous consequences of false information spreading.

Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation all carry risks, sometimes with real and serious consequences, as we have seen from many examples in this book. Conspiracies and fake news distort facts, manipulate public opinion, and can lead to harmful actions. Some people truly believed that Pope Francis supported Trump's candidacy, while others still think that Haitians in Ohio eat cats and dogs. So why would they not believe the false claim I just made up here about helmet use to illustrate how easy it is to fabricate content, make it believable, and spread it further? False statements circulate rapidly, and once they take hold, it is quite difficult to undo—just

like the misguided belief that riding a bike without a helmet is safe. Such misconceptions not only distort reality but their spread can contribute to divisions within society and even violence, as we have seen in the case of the Pizzagate conspiracy.

A lawyer might assert that they would never publicly disclose private information about their client. A virologist would likely insist that they would not go a single season without a flu shot. Similarly, as a professor of journalism and a journalist dedicated to consuming and sharing trustworthy information, I would never disseminate posts I do not trust. Even though most of the day I spend keeping an eye on social media as it signals what is trending and how people react to it, my go-to sources to thoroughly inform myself about current events and their impact on society are reliable news sources. As Bender et al. (2023) noted, "going to news professionals for accurate information is essentially the same as going to a licensed surgeon for a medical procedure instead of a person on social media offering an opinion on how they'd perform the operation" (p. 4). This is the reason I found it crucial to begin this book with an introduction to professional journalism sources, then provide guidance on how to fight false content and, finally, discuss citizen active engagement in content creation through participatory journalism and the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on news ecology. Digital literacy is the key to evaluating sources, distinguishing between facts and opinions, credible journalism and fake news, and recognizing bias in stories. It is the only safe path to empower people to make informed decisions about their lives, thus promoting a well-informed public and strengthening democracy.

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