



## After the Fact | [Finding Facts](#)

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### TRANSCRIPT

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**Alan Miller, founder and CEO, the News Literacy Project:** What we found right from the start is that students immediately begin consuming more news. They gain a greater understanding and respect for the role of the First Amendment, and a free press in a democracy. Eighty percent to 90 percent tell us that they're better able to both discern and create credible information. And they tell us that they're more likely to engage in certain civic actions. And half to two-thirds have told us they're more likely to vote in elections, when old enough to do so.

**Dan LeDuc, host:** That's Alan Miller who runs the News Literacy Project. This is "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and today we're talking with Alan about sorting fact from fiction in this digital age.

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**Dan LeDuc:** There's an old admonition in newsrooms: If your mother says she loves you, check it out. It means journalists aren't supposed to accept what appears true without asking questions and confirming sources. With anyone able to publish just about anything on social media these days, it's easy for misinformation to spread quickly. In fact, as we'll hear in a moment, studies show that false information spreads much faster than accurate news. And that leads us to this episode's data point: 64 percent. A Pew Research Center survey finds that 64 percent of Americans say false news stories are creating a great deal of confusion over the basic facts about current issues and events.

As news is shared across social media, it's increasingly up to all of us to double check if Mom still loves us. Today, Alan Miller is going to help explain how—and also talk about why he thinks more classroom time should be devoted to learning those skills.

Miller spent three decades as a newspaper reporter and won the Pulitzer Prize while at the *Los Angeles Times*. But a decade ago, he created the News Literacy Project. He had a mission in mind.



**Alan Miller:** I think that misinformation and disinformation are the equivalent of a public health threat. I think that they are harmful to the country's democracy, and dangerous to the health of its citizens. You know, our democracy is founded upon an informed electorate that can make choices in its self-interest. I think that in this fraught information landscape, it is increasingly difficult for people to determine what is credible and to know what information to trust, to share, and to act on—as consumers and as citizens.

It's called the News Literacy Project. We're an educational nonprofit that works with educators and journalists to give middle school and high school students the tools to know what to believe in a digital world. And to be informed and engaged citizens in a democracy.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, you come into this whole subject of news literacy as someone who is a practitioner. More than three decades as a newspaper reporter. So, you're actually sort of using journalism tools as your teaching tools, when you're working with students?

**Alan Miller:** Yes. We believe that in the information age, everybody is their own editor and everybody can be their own publisher. So how does the next generation play those roles in ways that are credible, and responsible, and empower their voices? We think what we're doing is really teaching a new literacy for the 21st century. That this is a survival skill in an information age, particularly for students from underserved communities.

**Dan LeDuc:** Let's talk about a couple of examples of fake news, rumors—whatever we want to call them. But, there was that famous photo of a shark swimming down a highway after Hurricane Harvey. Didn't happen. Some people thought it was real. And track down for us what actually occurred, and the implications of it. Because it sounds, at first glance, sort of whimsical.

**Alan Miller:** Yes, indeed. So, this is a good example. When there is any major news story, whether it's a disaster or an election, there is the opportunity to insert counterfeit news or fake news amid the real news. People are focused. They're often a little bit credulous. And we see this again and again. So, Hurricane Harvey was an example. Part of the challenge is not just of course text but photos and video. Because it's so easy to create fake images, which was the case here of the shark on the highway. And as you said, on the one hand this is kind of a humorous thing. On the other hand, there was some online discussion about the fact that—of people who already were experiencing things like fish in their basement, right?

**Dan LeDuc:** Right! That's a reality of a hurricane.



**Alan Miller:** That was a reality. But we're prone to believe that. They may have been less inclined to leave their homes and shelter in place, and therefore jeopardize their safety.

**Dan LeDuc:** When you talk to young students who are just getting into the real world of keeping up with all this stuff, what are you finding? Are they credulous, incredulous? Do they evolve over time?

**Alan Miller:** So, we've spent a lot of time in middle and high school classrooms in the past decade. And I think one of the biggest takeaways for us is how credulous in some ways students can be and how cynical in others.

*[Sound of typing]*

**Teacher:** And what's the newsworthy event?

**Student:** She got the—

**Teacher:** But this site – wait, look at the top of this site again, see, this is confusing me. This looks real, I don't know. What do you think?

**Student:** I feel like this is a real site, but this article is fake.

**Teacher:** Oh, all right. So, let's go back to the lesson then. Okay, so, click. Okay. And now do you think that this is fact or fiction?

**Student:** Fiction.

**Teacher:** Fiction, good. Click and let's see if we're right.

**Alan Miller:** What we found in general is that students tend to believe that all information is created equal. And we've actually heard some students say that it's more credible if it's a blog or it's on YouTube because it's unmediated. And it's not going through the filter of a commercial news outlet. And of course, that may be true as a primary source, if you know who created it and for what purpose, and what standards and accountability—and very often you don't.



**Dan LeDuc:** Right. Right. Let's break that down a little bit. I mean, to go from sort of believing everything and in a few years—from middle school to high school, you're saying some of these kids have reached a point where they're just convinced so much of it is driven by bias.

**Alan Miller:** You know, I think we take a lot for granted. And I think for not only the current generation of students, but perhaps in many cases for their parents, I think there is a lack of understanding and appreciation of what it takes to create quality journalism.

**Dan LeDuc:** I also look at the same sort of surveys of public opinion, whether it's the Pew Research Center or elsewhere, that has really documented a really dramatic decline in the public's trust in the news media. What happened there, do you think?

**Alan Miller:** So, I think there was a confluence of forces at work here. I think, first of all, news organizations have historically not done a good job of telling the public what they do, and how they do it, and why they do it that way.

**Dan LeDuc:** More transparency, just on how you get the job done.

**Alan Miller:** Yes. I think they do much better now.

**Dan LeDuc:** Right.

**Alan Miller:** And this is one of the values of having the internet, because news organizations can now publish their documents—

**Dan LeDuc:** Right.

**Alan Miller:** —behind them, and publish transcripts of interviews, and be much more transparent about how they got to that point with what they published or put on the air. Look, I think there were also a lot of self-inflicted wounds. There were obviously some major cases of journalists who did fabricate news and information. And so, I think it's left journalism really vulnerable to this issue of trust. The other thing that's now happened is, in our hyper-partisan environment people tend to see the news through prisms of red and blue. Many people tend to look at anything they don't agree with as either being driven by bias or being fake. Whereas things that tend to confirm their point of view, they think are more accurate and more fair-minded. And that's been stoked by partisans on both sides. And in an environment where you already had some undermining of trust in other respects, I think it's really deep in that.



**Dan LeDuc:** You raise a good point about this sort of echo chamber effect. And that seems to me it's happening two ways, right? I mean, there is sort of sources of news that—to come at things from a very harsh partisan perspective on either side of the political spectrum. But social media has a different approach too, in the sense that it gives you more of what you've already been getting, right? How does that work, and how is that also playing into all this?

**Alan Miller:** People now can go to sources they know they're likely to agree with, and—whether left or right—and only get news and information from those places, thereby deepening their own beliefs and not challenging them. In addition, the algorithms abet that phenomenon when people are getting news information online. Because what people see when they search or through social media is in large measure determined by what they like, what they search for, who they follow, who their friends are. And so, whether they're even aware of it or not, they're tending to get things that also are reinforcing and are deepening their filter bubbles—which Brian Stelter of CNN now says are becoming filter prisons. With the News Literacy Project and our virtual classroom Checkology—and we have a lesson on algorithms—is first of all, we make students aware of this. We make them aware of their own confirmation bias and their inclination to judge information based on their prevailing views. And also the role of the algorithms—to further deepen that phenomenon. So, they're conscious of it, and we teach them some ways they can turn down a little bit of that filtering on the algorithms. And then we encourage them to get information from a wide range of sources. Not to go necessarily to only places they agree with, but to go to places that will challenge their views and give them kind of a wider perspective on the world.

**Dan LeDuc:** The News Literacy Project is now in schools. Give us some of the numbers here so people really have a sense of the scope we're talking about. This is a national approach.

**Alan Miller:** Yes. So, we have over 400 journalists in our online directory, all volunteers, and 33 news organizations who partner with us. So, two years ago, we launched our virtual classroom, which we call Checkology. We want to create a next generation of “checkologists” who check things out.

**Dan LeDuc:** Right.

**Alan Miller:** And this is a robust, engaging online platform with lessons primarily led by diverse and distinguished journalists and other experts on the First Amendment and digital media. And students learn basic concepts, and then they really deepen their knowledge by doing. So, they



learn about how journalists filter information to decide what is news. And then they play the role of an editor, and have to decide what stories go on their home page and the lead and the off lead, and reflect on that.

They learn about the First Amendment. And then they play the role of a judge in landmark cases involving speech and press, and have to decide whether they're covered. And then we teach them about the standards of quality journalism. And they have to be—they become a rookie reporter thrown into a breaking news story, and have to interview eyewitness sources and expert sources.

**Dan LeDuc:** What's the story? What do they do?

**Alan Miller:** So, the story is a tanker truck has collided with a car in a residential area, and the tanker truck has turned over and spilled a mysterious green slime that is leaking to the sewers and onto the lawn. And students have to determine, basically, how the accident happened. And then whether the—what is this slime, and whether it poses a public health hazard.

**Dan LeDuc:** Sounds like a pretty good story.

**Alan Miller:** Yes. And they have to, at one point, tweet about it. And then they get two different versions of the story and decide which one reflects the standards of quality journalism. And it's a very engaging way for students to learn basic news literacy skills.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, I'm sure you're trying to measure the impact. What have you found out?

**Alan Miller:** Well from the very beginning we have measured our impact through pre- and post-unit surveys of students, and post-unit surveys of teachers, assessing changes in students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. And what we found right from the start is that students immediately begin consuming more news. They gain a greater understanding and respect for the role of the First Amendment, and a free press in a democracy. Eighty percent to 90 percent tell us that they're better able to both discern and create credible information. And they tell us that they're more likely to engage in certain civic actions, such as correcting an error when they find it, or posting a blog post, or writing a letter to the editor. And half to two-thirds have told us they're more likely to vote in elections, when old enough to do so.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well we're both working for nonpartisan organizations that really are trying to figure out ways to get information to people, and then let the democratic process roll after



that. It feels like what you're doing is feeding the lifeblood—information is the lifeblood of a democracy.

**Alan Miller:** Absolutely. That's the premise upon which we start. I mean, we think what we're doing is essential for three things. One is the future of education. Also for the survival of quality journalism, by creating an appreciation and demand for it. But most important is for the health of the democracy, which is founded upon an engaged and informed electorate. And you know, as you mentioned, we are a rigorously nonpartisan organization, and we pride ourselves on that in terms of our curriculum. And we are in urban and rural areas, red states and blue states, and want to be providing this resource to teachers everywhere. And what we're trying to do is really give facts a fighting chance. People decide now what they're going to see, where they're going to see it, on what device they're going to see it. And then what they do with it. Whether they trust it, whether they share it, whether they act on it. So, we believe that there not only needs to be a massive effort to teach news literacy and have a news literate public, but also kind of a public service campaign to convince people that they need to take personal responsibility. That fake news stops with me. And that I'm going to be an up-stander for facts, and be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

**Dan LeDuc:** So, Alan, you were fighting fake news back before fighting fake news was a cool thing to do.

**Alan Miller:** Yes. We sometimes say that we feel like we've gone from being a voice in the wilderness to an answer to a prayer.

**Dan LeDuc:** Yeah. That's not bad. Well, Alan Miller, thank you.

**Alan Miller:** Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

**Dan LeDuc:** For more on the News Literacy Project, including a chance to read its seven simple steps to not get fooled, go to [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](https://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact).

We'd love to hear your feedback. Drop us a line at [podcasts@pewtrusts.org](mailto:podcasts@pewtrusts.org). And find us on Twitter at PewTrusts, or leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is "After the Fact."

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