

COMMENTARY

SUNSHINE WEEK

Importance of recognizing, fighting against fake



Peter Adams

We've become so accustomed to frequently and easily accessing information on demand - from more sources and in more forms than at any other time in history - that it's easy to forget how quickly our information landscape has evolved and what that evolution means for us as individuals, as news consumers and as participants in a democracy.

It can also be easy to forget how much the information we choose to read, watch and hear really matters. It's the basis for many of the decisions we make - for ourselves, for our families and for our civic society. It helps us determine the kind of lives we lead, the social and political structures we want to change or preserve, and the kind of world we inhabit. It is the very foundation of both personal empowerment and a robust democracy.

To be meaningfully engaged with the world around us, we must be informed. But what does that mean in an age of information

overload in which so much "content" isn't what it appears to be? How, in other words, can we know what to believe?

Here's a start:

• **Learn from encounters with misinformation.** Most people know they can't trust a lot of what they see online, but misinformation still thrives, especially on social media platforms. Why? Because it bypasses our rational minds by exploiting our deepest instincts and ideals. But we can learn to recognize some of the patterns of these exploits - stories that are too perfect; images - and now even video - that lend themselves to manipulation; headlines that evoke anger or fear; and claims about conspiracies or cover-ups that defy logic.

Tip: Try adding a variety of fact-checking organizations to your social media feeds to help you keep up with the latest viral falsehoods and learn to recognize some of their patterns.

• **Maintain a skeptical outlook but avoid cynicism.** In working to avoid misinformation, we can over-compensate, adopting the outlook that nothing is credible because no source of information is perfect; or overlooking the role our own biases play in our perceptions of bias. Balancing open-mindedness with skepticism is essential to being informed and engaged.

Tip: When evaluating information, remember that trustworthy sources of information don't ask you to trust them, they use their work to show you why you should.

• **Sharpen our understanding of journalistic standards.** For decades, news organizations have done a poor job of explaining to the public exactly how they do their work. But recently, more of them have begun to explain the story behind their stories - how they verify what they report, and the challenges they encounter along the way - to help build trust with their audiences. Most national news organizations also devote regular coverage to media issues. Following that coverage can help refine our ability to recognize quality journalism. And when news organizations make mistakes, pay attention to how they react. Reputable news organizations will not only correct the error but also explain how it happened.

Tip: Follow the work of media experts and journalism advocacy organizations, such as www.poynter.org.

• **Engage with journalists, ask questions and share your needs.** One of the most powerful aspects of today's information ecosystem is the access it gives you to public figures, including journalists. Use that access to ask

More Information

Washington Post 'How to be a journalist' series: www.wapo.st/2G683pv

Columbia Journalism Review journalism experts: bit.ly/2FF6WJg

Using Google Reverse Image Search: bit.ly/2Fnjyb1

How to find fake Twitter accounts: bit.ly/2wNHsvJ

Neiman Lab report on visuals and memes: bit.ly/2zPkkQs

The Verge story on creating fake audio and video: bit.ly/2Dbdlrw

questions about news coverage that has left you uncertain or uneasy; to share your ideas about better and more reporting on a topic; and to compliment work you find valuable.

Tip: Make a point of asking a reporter a follow-up question about a local news report.

• **Use fact-checking to clean up the information landscape.** Develop and apply fact-checking and digital forensics skills to call out misinformation - not only when you disagree with the information, but especially when it confirms your own biases. A simple internet search can disprove many falsehoods you encounter, but knowing how to do a reverse image search to spot phony photos, and how to recognize social media bots and fake (or "sockpuppet") accounts, can also help debunk bogus claims before they start to trend.

Tip: Visual misinformation might be more common than

you think, and the tools to create it are getting better.

These skills and mindsets can go a long way toward safeguarding your own news consumption, and ensuring a more credible, engaged and accurate information landscape for everyone.

Peter Adams, who is based in Chicago, is a senior vice president at The News Literacy Project in Washington, D.C., a nonpartisan, education nonprofit helping people sort fact from fiction. He's also the author of NLP's newsletter, The Sift, a weekly roundup of timely examples for discussion by students and concerned citizens. You can subscribe for free, including access to archives, at www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/thesift. (A version of this article originally was published in a GateHouse sister publication, The State Journal-Register in Springfield, Illinois.)

New & traditional ways to approach your elected officials



Tim Murray

"All politics is local." This famous quote by Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill, the former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives and proud son of Massachusetts, is used so often that it often seems cliché. But its frequent usage underscores the profound truth that drives decisions made by those in government, whether it be at city or town hall, the statehouse or the United States Capitol, and even the White House. In this regard it is critical that citizens feel empowered, and in fact encouraged, to communicate with their elected and appointed officials utilizing both traditional and new, innovative means of communication.

The advent of social media has impacted every sector of society with both positive and negative consequences. The internet and the explosive expansion of the use of handheld devices and tablets have facilitated new means of communication and commerce. People now email and text much more frequently, reducing the utilization of landline telephones at home or work. This technology has lowered the cost of entry into sectors of the economy and created new, disruptive businesses such as Lyft, Uber, Airbnb and Venmo, a mobile payment service. Unfortunately, we have also seen some of these methods of communication and expression, such as Facebook and Twitter, used for nefarious purposes. Russian operatives, with support from the highest levels of the Russian government, have sought to undermine democratic governance in the 2016 presidential election as well as in multiple European elections.

While it is my hope that the U.S. government will deal forcefully with these menacing Russian interventions, I am still a believer that these new avenues of communications can have a positive effect in encouraging citizen engagement in our participatory democracy. I believe this based on examples during my time as a former elected official at both the municipal and state levels.

Issues impacting people and families in the neighborhoods where they live and work - the politics that is local - should set the agenda for those in government. It is critical that people living and working in neighborhoods communicate to government officials about the issues they see impacting them and their community - in effect serving as eyes and ears on behalf of good government.

For example, even the hardest-working district city councilor cannot be aware of every street in her district that needs a pothole filled after a tough winter like the

one we're experiencing. This is where a picture from a cellphone taken by a neighborhood resident and texted with the street name and address to the district councilor can assist local government in filling the pothole in a timely and efficient manner.

I have seen how neighborhood residents have used Facebook to create or support neighborhood crime watches and improvement efforts. This constructive feedback and conversation often helps guide local, state and federal elected officials on where and how to use resources. Resources that can help solve a problem or create a new amenity or opportunity that strengthens a neighborhood.

A tweet, email or Facebook post can now communicate this information in real time. However, traditional outreach to government leaders via a letter, or phone call can continue to make a real difference as well. There is no better example of this than the 10-year effort to eradicate the presence of the Asian long-horned beetle.

Leaders in government were alerted to this by a phone call from a concerned resident in Worcester's Greendale neighborhood who noticed that a beetle in her backyard tree looked like the Asian long-horned beetle. This phone call prompted a massive response by local and state governments and from Washington as well. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to eradicate the beetle and reforest the neighborhoods impacted through active involvement of residents, as well as local, state and federal officials.

To bring positive change to your neighborhood, make your voice heard. Please know that your input on issues that some might dismiss are usually listened to and can help make a difference. It could be resurfacing a street currently full of potholes. It could help guide the state on where to build a new school or playground. It could lead to a police foot beat or the establishment of a rail trail. Change can sometimes be slow, but constructive and sustained communication with our elected and appointed officials through both new and traditional means of communication has and will continue to make a difference at the local level. In my experience I've found that most people are respectful and professional in these interactions with officials, even if in disagreement. It goes a long way not just in expeditiously resolving matters at hand, but in establishing relationships for the future.

Responsible elected officials at the local, state and federal levels welcome and want that type of engagement and communication. It's local and, yes, it's to some extent political. But it works, and helps make our cities and towns work better.

Timothy P. Murray, of Worcester, a former lieutenant governor of Massachusetts and prior to that the mayor of Worcester, is president and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce.

How public records requests helped teens, but still so much to do



Justin Silverman

When Boston Latin Academy students Mabel Gondres and Shayne Clinton began researching ways to fund a new community rec center in Hyde Park, they turned to the state's public records law. With the help of the Hyde Square Task Force, these teenage sleuths used the law to request information about a long-forgotten 1993 mandate that required the owners of TD Garden to hold fundraisers every year to benefit the city's recreation department.

"We sent letters to the TD Garden and the state. For weeks they just ignored us," Gondres explained. But then she and other volunteers began sending public records requests. "That is how we found out that TD Garden had not held one fundraiser and they had not raised one penny for 24 years," she said.

The amount owed to the city? \$14 million.

Gondres and Clinton shared their story last month during the New England First Amendment Coalition's annual awards luncheon in Boston. Along with fellow honorees Jane Mayer of The New Yorker and Todd Wallack of The Boston Globe, these two students provided a prelude to Sunshine Week and a reminder of why government transparency is so valuable to our communities.

Sunshine Week, a national campaign every March to celebrate the public's right to know, is an opportunity to assess local freedom of information laws, such as the Massachusetts public records statute. These laws intend to shine a light, or "sunshine," on the work of government and to help citizens better understand what their elected officials are doing on their behalf.

In Massachusetts, the work of Gondres and Clinton stands out as a public records success story.

But unfortunately such stories are rare. Despite recent changes to the public records law, there is still too much secrecy in the commonwealth.

After more than four decades without any major changes to the public records statute, the Massachusetts Legislature in 2016 reformed the law. The changes are both good (an attorney fee provision) and bad (longer response times). The most egregious part of the new law, however, is what didn't change. Massachusetts continues to be the only state in the country where the Legislature, judiciary and governor's office all claim to be exempt from the public records law. In other words, it took the state Legislature 43 years to pass meaningful public records reform and despite these changes most records are still kept secret.

This secrecy is a dangerous proposition. In 2014, for example, reporters in Virginia used the state's public records law to uncover more than \$177,000 in gifts and loans given to their

then-governor in exchange for promoting a dietary supplement company. The League of Women Voters in 2015 used Florida's public records law to obtain emails of state legislators showing that these representatives unconstitutionally remapped voting districts to benefit their own political party. If either of these scenarios were to play out in Massachusetts, our public records law would be of no help.

Major legislative reforms take many years to occur and there seems to be little political appetite for another one anytime soon. So what can be done?

First, we need to take advantage of the new attorney fee provision. This provision encourages attorneys to file lawsuits - litigation that would not otherwise occur - in hope of recouping legal fees and to push back against agencies that have up until now withheld records without consequence. As Wallack, of The Boston Globe, said during the luncheon, "Filing a lawsuit remains one of the best ways to hold agencies accountable and change the culture, change decades of tradition where agencies didn't have to release records because nothing bad would happen." The New England First Amendment Coalition now has a referral program that can connect record requesters with good cases to attorneys willing to represent them pro bono.

Second, we need to let our representatives know that the public records law still needs fixing. Along with the changes in 2016, the state created a commission to study how the statute could apply to the Legislature, judiciary and governor. The commission is led by state Rep. Jennifer Benson, D-Lunenburg, and Sen. Walter Timilty, D-Milton. We need to share our stories with them and demand the law be expanded. It doesn't matter what additional changes we make to our current law - if it continues to exclude the most influential offices of state government, transparency will remain elusive.

Lastly, we need to remember that the public records law is not the exclusive purview of journalists and attorneys. It is a nonpartisan tool that can be used by all of us to make sure our tax dollars are well spent and our interests represented. It is a law that can be used by all citizens, even high school students like Gondres and Clinton.

The two students are continuing their campaign and are now submitting additional public record requests to learn more about the state's relationship with TD Garden. Owners of the stadium paid only \$1.65 million of the money the students say is owed. Still, using the public records law is an empowering experience they said. Clinton captured the spirit of Sunshine Week best:

"If we do our research and keep to the facts," he said, "we can expose even some of the most powerful people in the country."

Justin Silverman of Wayland, an attorney focusing on media law, is executive director of the New England First Amendment Coalition, which is based in Westboro and is a nonprofit organization that advocates for the First Amendment, including the public's right to know about its government.

