TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host: If you've been following the news about COVID-19 closely these past few months, you're not alone. In fact, you're in good company-- about 87 percent of Americans say they are following news about the virus closely. And here's something else: about half of Americans say they are having trouble discerning fact from fiction.

[Music break]

Welcome to After the Fact. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. That 87 percent is our data point for this episode.

Misinformation isn't something new—sometimes intentional and sometimes accidental, it's always been there in society. But the modern digital age amplifies false news and gives it legs that can carry it around the globe faster than at any time in history. And with this pandemic, the health risk that could result from false information could be very real. In fact, the World Health Organization calls what's happening alongside the pandemic, an Infodemic.

To talk about all this—and to maybe help you sort out what's accurate and what's not, is Alan Miller, who directs the News Literacy Project.

Dan LeDuc: Alan Miller directs the News Literacy Project here, just outside Washington DC. Welcome.

Alan Miller, founder and CEO of the News Literacy Project: It's good to be with you.

Dan LeDuc: Hope you are staying safe during all of these difficult times.] Let's just take a moment, for our listeners who maybe didn't join us the last time you and I spoke, tell us what the News Literacy Project is, how you work with students, and why people can believe what you're telling them right now.

Alan Miller: The News Literacy Project is a national educational nonprofit that produces resources and empowers educators to teach middle and high school students how to know what news and information to trust and to give them an appreciation of the vital role of the First Amendment in a free press and democracy. Our goal is to give students the tools to be informed, engaged participants in the country's civic life. We are rigorously non-partisan, we are have a commitment to integrity, transparency, and accountability, and to giving the next generation the tools to fully and effectively participate in the country's civic life.

Dan LeDuc: So, Alan, you know, misinformation is not something real new. It's always seemed to exist. Sometimes we call it propaganda. Sometimes it's just plain misinformation and/or disinformation for a lot of different purposes. It feels like a bigger deal today in society. Why is that?

Alan Miller: Well, in fact, we're living in the most of complex information landscape in human history. We have more verifiable and credible information available to us, literally at our fingertips, than ever before. But it is being overwhelmed by a tsunami of misinformation that seeks to mislead us, exploit us, and divide us. Young people today are inheriting an information ecosystem created by another generation that did not fully foresee just how it would unfold. Therefore, we feel we have a responsibility to give them the tools to successfully navigate this landscape in a way that can bring us together around verifiable, agreed upon facts. It's why teaching news literacy is an essential life skill today.

Dan LeDuc: The World Health Organization has, in addition to declaring this a pandemic, declared something called an infodemic, problems with information. Can you talk a little bit about what an infodemic might be and how we can live through that too?

Alan Miller: The World Health Organization coined the term infodemic to refer to the overwhelming and rapidly evolving amount of information, including a torrent of misinformation about the coronavirus outbreak. In fact, more recently, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres went further, and he called this a dangerous epidemic of misinformation - a poison that is putting lives at risk.

Dan LeDuc: That's a bold statement. How can we as consumers of news- ensure we are reading real news, and not looking at fake information or manipulated images or video?

Alan Miller: The responsibility, really, is on the consumer to be vigilant in checking what we're seeing and, particularly, what we're sharing to make sure it's credible. There are some really basic concepts that I think we can all apply. The first thing is to pause. To look at what we're seeing and to check our emotions. Is this something that is provoking anger, or fear, or amazement. When information causes that kind of response, it makes us particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Then examine the source. Take a moment to do a quick search on the person or the organization to see what else they have created and whether they are credible.

Check replies and comments to anything you're looking at to see if they confirm or debunk what you're viewing. We generally would say find a wide variety of credible news sources with different points of view to consume and follow. And follow a story over time. Don't take this first source that you see and share it. Particularly if you're uncertain, do not share it. And then finally, use readily available online tools like Google's reverse image searching or fact checking sites like Factcheck, PolitiFact, or Snopes if there's something that you're uncertain about.

Dan LeDuc: You've talked a little bit about ways to sort of dig down and how people can try to determine what's true or false. Are there particular sources that people should be

able to rely on? I mean, should we be giving credence to government sources over private sources? What are just some of the more detailed nuances that people can look at to help them make up their mind?

Alan Miller: Well, certainly in the context of the pandemic, there are sources that one can go to, public health sources, the World Health Organization, the CDC, local public health agencies. One can certainly look for, you know, fact-based, credible news sources. At the end of the day, I mean, it's incumbent upon all of us to not only search for credible sources, but to push back against those who are sharing things that misinform. Because the virus itself is a kind of hard and immutable truth. And it is impervious to spin, or falsehoods, or magical thinking. So I think the only effective way that we can combat it is with science, and facts, and hard truths. And in this respect, too, we're all in this together.

Dan LeDuc: You share some amazing examples of misinformation on your website. How can people examine posts, including images, to determine what's real vs fake?

Alan Miller: Well, there's a tremendous amount of manipulation of images, not only creating false images, but taking them from a different period of time or a different event and presenting them as happening out of context. So, one of the things we teach students and encourage to do it is to do reverse image searches where you can actually go and find what the origin of that image is and how it's been misused. And the fact checking organizations also will do this and provide kind of a context and a framework for images that go viral and have widespread impact.

Dan LeDuc: Well, let me ask, you know, we hear, sometimes, a lot of opinion being expressed about what's the right way to approach the virus and some of the regulations that come out of it. And certainly, people are entitled to their opinions. But a lot of times they invoke, the First Amendment says I can say this. Well, we all want our opinions protected. But especially in a time of a virus, do we really want misinformation protected? What is the role of the First amendment when we apply it to misinformation, especially at a time like this?

Alan Miller: Well, the First Amendment prohibits Congress from making any law to limit free speech. So, this may be more a matter of, first of all, what the role of the platforms and social media, as private entities, permit. And then it's also a matter of how we respond to what people are saying and whether it's something that we tend to believe and, particularly, tend to share. You know, when I was a reporter at the Los Angeles Times we would often say that facts are stubborn things. And usually we would say that when a fact got in the way of what would otherwise have been a good story.

Dan LeDuc: I remember those days.

Alan Miller: Yes, indeed, that it's opinions that are impervious to facts. And I think that it's important that we think about our own sort of confirmation bias, what we bring to the news and information that we encounter, and not be prone to simply believe those things or seek out those sources that we're likely to agree with.

Dan LeDuc: It gets back to the personal responsibility, maybe challenge your own point of view a little bit more often.

Alan Miller: Yes, I think that's really essential. I think the danger is that when we see our news and information through prisms of red and blue, we have a tendency to see the world in terms that are black and white. I think this has made it extremely difficult for us to agree on basic facts before we then can debate about what maybe the public policy solutions that should be. And we really need to get back to a place where we can find some common ground so that we can reach consensus to address, not only how to move forward on the pandemic, but all of the other public policy challenges that the country faces.

Dan LeDuc: We were talking a lot about the personal responsibility we all have as we read information and dissect it, try to determine what's accurate for ourselves. But you know, there's also that share button. And, you know what, maybe what people need to also remember is every time that they hit the share button, they become a publisher themselves, right? Would that be a correct way of looking at it? Because as you share information, you're almost saying you're taking a little responsibility for it yourself when you send it out into the world.

Alan Miller: That's absolutely true. And a major part of the problem in the fraught information landscape is actually the sharing. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes, viral rumors, could not get the kind of virality that they do without us either wittingly or, in most cases, I think, unwittingly being part of the propagation of that toxic information. So it's really incumbent upon all of us to pause and to think about what we're looking at and to assess its credibility before we hit share, or retweet, or forward something, and to become part of an information solution instead of part of the misinformation problem.

Dan LeDuc: We're living amid a pandemic. But we're also living in a year in which there's a number of important political campaigns in the country, not the least of which is the presidential race, always an important time for America. Given the misinformation and disinformation that can be out there, what should voters do to avoid being misled?

Alan Miller: We always say that information is the basis for our decisions and those decisions become the basis for actions. This is especially important when it comes to voting. I would encourage people to do the kinds of things that we've been discussing when they encounter information, whether it's through social media or through political campaign ads. They need to realize that they can take some agency and not let their habits simply be determined by what is coming at them, and to ask questions about who has created the information and for what purpose to look at the sources behind it to see if it's intended to provoke their emotions or to inform them in a dispassionate way.

Certainly, this would be the case when you're looking at political campaigns and advertising, to look at both the bias in what you're looking at and the bias that you bring to it yourself, and then to look for you know the evidence behind it and whether it's something that you can you can verify. I think that you know this is absolutely essential as we move into, not only dealing with the pandemic, but into what will be an incredibly intense election season.

Dan LeDuc: And tell people listening, Alan, again what they can find from your organization that can help them do all of this.

Alan Miller: We have a good deal of information on our website. We have various New Lit tips, and quizzes at newslit.org. We also have our virtual classroom, Checkology, which is at checkology.org, that is being used in schools throughout the country. We have a weekly newsletter called The Sift that takes the most recent viral rumors, conspiracy, theories, and hoaxes and turns them into timely lessons with prompt discussion prompts and links. We also have an app called Informable which is a engaging game that builds news literacy skills for all ages and is available from Google Play and the app store.

And we are in the process, actually, of creating more resources for the general public. By the fall, we will have a Checkology for all and a version of The Sift for the public, which is not only provides teachable examples, but is really the stuff of online conversation, and water cooler conversation, dinnertime conversation. And all of our resources are available for free. And you can learn more about them at newslit.org.

Dan LeDuc: Alan, thanks so much. This has been a huge help. And as always, a pleasure to talk to you.

Alan Miller: Thanks very much, Dan. It was a pleasure as well.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: You can go on our website pewtrusts.org-slash-after the fact, to learn more about sorting fact from fiction in the news and to get more information about the News Literacy Project.

Until next time, please stay safe and maybe pause for just a second, before you click the share button. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

[(Female voice over music) After the Fact is produced by the Pew Charitable Trusts.]