Analyzing News: Ask the Right Questions

How news literate are you? Do you know how to judge the credibility of a news story?
As misinformation and disinformation reshape the media landscape and flood our digital devices,
how do we distinguish facts from falsehoods and opinion? How do we know what and who to believe?

News literacy is knowing how to judge the reliability and credibility of news and information, identify bias and falsehoods,
and understand ways in which First Amendment freedoms affect what we consume and create in the media ecosystem.
Get into the habit of asking *key questions* to analyze and evaluate news and journalistic practices across media platforms.

> This worksheet is a hybrid of media and news literacy concepts designed to analyze news and information for any media format or platform.
> Starting with the Center for Media Literacy's framework, the 5 Core Concepts and Key Questions highlighted below are adapted to explore the nature
> of news and develop guiding questions based on the news process and journalism practices and standards in the emergent digital media environment.

News Headline: _____ News Outlet/Media Platform: _____

Story Type: _____ News Driver_____ Story Placement: _____

CORE CONCEPTS	KEY QUESTIONS
AUTHORSHIP: *All media messages are constructed.* ***All news stories are constructed.*** News is constructed by *journalists – reporters, correspondents, anchors, editors, columnists, producers, photographers, videographers, freelancers, etc. –* who serve as *gatekeepers* determining the newsworthiness of a story and validity and veracity of the information in the news production process. Others generate stories who are not professional journalists such as citizen journalists presenting an unreported angle of a story, special interest groups promoting a cause, and advertisers marketing their products. The Internet also has enabled news consumers to be their own gatekeepers and upload, post, share or retweet news stories without regard to the authenticity or reliability of the information.	*Who created this message?* *Who wrote, photographed, edited, produced, and distributed this news story?* Was it constructed by a professional journalist who works for a news outlet? Citizen journalist? Blogger? Activist? Special interest group? Expert in the field? Ordinary person? Anonymous source? Government official? Lobbyist? Publicist? Advertiser? News-writing bot or computer-generated algorithm? *Where did the news story appear? When was it created? Is it current?* Did it originate from a news organization? Alternative news source? Social media platform? How was it shared? Is it the original news story? Consider: How do you know who is responsible for the news story and when and where it appeared?
FORMAT: *Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.* ***Each medium has distinctive characteristics and formats its content using creative techniques specific to the media technology – text, graphics, audio, video or multimedia – to attract our attention.*** Journalism uses codes and conventions specific to news storytelling such as headline, lead, dateline, byline, the 5 W's, inverted pyramid, AP style, source, attribution, photo credit, scoop, sound bite, story frame and placement. How a story is constructed depends on the type of news: *hard news* about politics, economics, war and crime is fact-based and up-to-the-minute while *soft news* about the arts, lifestyle and human interest topics is entertaining. Which stories get reported and how they are covered is driven by *news values or news drivers* that determine the story's newsworthiness: the *prominence* of who is involved, *timeliness, importance,* and *magnitude* of the event, its *relevance and proximity* to people, whether the story is of *human interest* or about *conflict or change* or something *unusual or odd* that happened. The more *newsworthy* a story, the more importance it is given by a news outlet and, in turn, the more attention it receives from the audience. Certain techniques are used to attract attention such as a bold headline, tease, prominent story placement, breaking news and live interviews.	*What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?* *What creative choices were made to construct the news story? Which medium and format, story type and placement, visual/audio cues, and news space?* *Medium and format:* print, TV, radio, Internet, streaming, website, podcast, talk radio, video, meme, GIF, tweet or other social media *Story type:* straight news, investigative, feature, editorial, op-ed column, analysis, review, advertorial or sponsored content *Story placement:* front page upper half above the fold/scroll or lower half below the fold/scroll, opening/close of a newscast or tease before a commercial, featured on a news aggregator or social media platform *Visual or audio cues:* large or catchy headline, photograph, image, graph, color, music, lighting, teaser, breaking news, live interview, original footage/recording *News space:* number of minutes or column inches devoted to the story and number of days the story is in the news *Is it the original content?* Or was the text, image, audio/video digitally altered? Was it previously published elsewhere and made to appear current? *Do the headline and/or photos match the lead and story?* Or used to attract interest or get "likes" or serve as *clickbait* to evoke strong emotion? Consider: How do the limits or advantages of the media technology, story type and news values affect the credibility and coverage of the story?

CONTENT: *Media have embedded values and points of view.*

News content is an account of an event that presents a view of reality based on the best available evidence at the time – truth in journalism evolves as new evidence emerges.

How journalists frame stories can affect point of view and interpretation of the information. *Story frames* commonly present a straight news account that states who, what, when, where, why and how something happened (5 W's and H), emphasize conflict or consensus, track winners and losers, expose wrongdoings or injustice, provide a reality check, explore a policy, focus on a person's reaction, explain how something works or relates to a larger trend or historical perspective, conjecture about the future or profile a personality.

To foster trust between a news outlet and its news consumers and protect the integrity of the newsgathering process, *journalism is guided by core principles and professional codes of ethics* – standards of truth, accuracy, impartiality, fairness and balance to ensure verification, independence, and accountability.

Accuracy and verification is based on a *hierarchy of evidence*: *direct first-hand evidence* (eye-witness testimony, source related to the story, physical evidence such as DNA, audio/video footage, photograph) is more reliable than *second-hand evidence* (someone knowledgeable but not directly involved in event) or *indirect evidence* (spokesperson, hearsay, off the record, reconstruction, computer model).

Note: Journalism distinguishes between news and opinion such as editorials, op-ed columns, analysis and reviews written from a specific viewpoint.

What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
What underlying social, cultural or political values and viewpoints, if any, are implied and not explicitly stated or selectively omitted in the story?

How is the story framed? What does the reporting emphasize or de-emphasize? Does the frame fit the story or mispresent the event or issues?

What is the evidence? How accurate and reliable is the evidence? Is it direct or indirect? First-hand or second-hand?

Who are the sources? Are sources identified or unnamed?
How do the sources know about it? Are they in some way involved in the story? Do sources provide evidence or make assertions?

Is the coverage fair to the evidence?
Fair language: Are the choice of words used to characterize the event, issue, newsmakers and organizations neutral and free of loaded language?
Fair presentation: Are selected images appropriate and not prejudicial?
Fair play: Are all relevant perspectives represented?
Is the coverage balanced? Or is the reporting one-sided or hyper-partisan? Do newsmakers get to respond to negative charges?
False balance: Does the coverage present a false balance or equivalency because the facts do not support evidence that opposing arguments are equally valid?
Are the facts put into context? Are conclusions reasonable or based on flawed logic? Do you need more information? Is opinion labeled or disguised as fact?

Consider: Is the reporter transparent about what she/he knows or does not know and why? How does the reporter let readers, viewers or listeners know?

PURPOSE: *Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.*

News stories are created for a purpose – to inform, educate, entertain, persuade, distract or increase profit and/or power.

While most media, even news media, are profit-driven, the primary purpose of news is to inform citizens about what is happening in the world.

To safeguard citizens' access to newsworthy and trustworthy information, the *First Amendment* of the U.S. Constitution protects *freedom of the press* and empowers the press to function as the *Fourth Estate* – an unofficial branch of government that serves as a watchdog to monitor the Legislative, Judicial and Executive branches for abuses of power.

Why is this message being sent?
What is the purpose of this story? Why was it created, published and/or shared?
Is it to inform, make you laugh, change your mind, and/or promote a product, event or person for power or money? Or is the motive to intentionally deceive and spread falsehoods for profit and/or political power?

How might the purpose affect the way a story is communicated and to whom it is targeted – choice of media format and platform, news driver or story frame?

Consider: How might economic decisions affect the construction of a news narrative? In what ways might news coverage affect the democratic process?

AUDIENCE: *Different people experience the same media message differently.*

People understand the same news story in different ways.

There is no one way to interpret a news story. People interpret messages based on their prior knowledge, specific skills, individual experiences, and preexisting values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions.

Unconscious or implicit bias that reinforces stereotypes might affect how a person interprets and acts on a news story.

Confirmation bias might trap people in a filter bubble or echo chamber because they prefer news and information that supports their views.

Using multiple reliable news sources from varying perspectives, reading beyond the headline, watching past the teaser, and *examining the evidence* can increase people's understanding of an issue and expand their worldview.

How might different people understand this message differently?
Who is the target audience? How do you know?
How might the intended audience understand the story?
How might other people interpret it based on their age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, education, social class, political ideology or where they live?

How might *unconscious bias* affect a person's understanding of a news story or attitudes, beliefs and opinions about the topic? How might *confirmation bias* affect people's news choices? What actions might someone take in response to the story?

How might *fact checking* change a person's understanding of a story or news habits?

Consider: What does the message mean to you? Does it reinforce or conflict with your knowledge, values and beliefs? How might it affect the way you act, think and feel about the event, issue, company or person in the news?
In what ways might it influence your participation in the democratic process?