

Sue Gill sits behind the table of a book sale that proceeds a scholarship fund at the Southeastern Interscholastic Press Association convention. **Gill** has been an educator in English, government, and journalism for 52 years. She works at SIPA annually, and takes off time from her full-time teaching job to attend the convention.



Pressing for truth

At its most basic, democracy relies on two elements: the people's will, and their access to information. But increasingly in the past few years, one of these has come into question.

"In today's world, we have a president that is yelling 'fake news' all the time," retired teacher Sue Gill said. We have people saying 'that's not true, they're biased.' The Democratic party, the Republican party; they did this, they did that. And we have lost faith in newspapers writing the truth. We've lost faith in having television report actual, factual information... And I think right now, nobody knows what is the truth."

It's established that many mainstream news outlets are biased: Fox News is usually conservative, while CNN leans liberal, for example. Both sides believe that the other is lying, and that is what they present to their audiences. And they aren't always wrong when they make these accusations.

"Bernie Sanders put together a recent speech that supposedly came from Mr. Obama, okay," Gill said. "But it was multiple speeches, and he pulled a sentence or two from each one to reflect what he wanted to reflect. Did Obama say these sentences? He did. But not in the context in which they're being used."

Because of the prevalence of misinformation, and the spreading paranoia about mainstream news, it's not easy for the public to decipher the truth.

And because of that, it's easier than ever for people to create their own truths.

"Most people will only believe what they want to believe. They don't bother to check because they know that their person is telling the truth, and those other people are lying," Gill said. The expectation of fake news gives people an excuse to discredit the other side of an argument.

But why has this problem arisen now, of

all times?

"I think it's happening right now because of president Trump," Gill said. "The man was a criminal before he ran for president. If you go back and look at his business dealings, the amount of times he's declared bankruptcy, the way he has used the courts and paid a dollar on the thousand to pay his creditors... And I think our way of campaigning for an election has changed. And it's dirty politics. And it's behind the door."

Gill feels that Donald Trump has covered up his questionable activities by preventing information about matters such as the Russian investigation from being exposed, preventing the news from presenting the complete truth.

"We've always been based on innocence until proven guilty, right?" Gill said. "In order to prove someone guilty, you have to present factual information that is visible or verbal."

And of course, the president is known for his use of the term, "fake news."

Trump is not the only reason for the ongoing distrust of news networks, however.

"I think that [the problem is] the democratization of media, that everyone can put something out there on the internet, and they don't have to have a degree or have gone through any kind of journalistic training of what is ethical to say is true about something," Adam Salloum, college journalism major, said. "That can be a really good thing, and I think the risk of it is that anybody can say anything now, and there's so much available for consumption that it's hard to keep up with fact-checking and checking to see what's real and what's not."

The tremendous growth of social media over the past decade has given a voice to the public, but while it is good for more opinions to be heard, it also means that it's easier to spread rumors and lies.

"I think there are too many people, teenagers in particular, who are beginning to think that you cannot believe what you hear,"

Gill said. "And my question to them is, what are you gonna believe? How are you going to find out? Who is going to give you the information?"

The next step is to find the answers to these questions. It's important for both reporters and the public to focus on the facts, not just their own biases.

"I taught for 52 years and I taught social studies, I taught English, I taught reading, I taught journalism and I taught yearbook," Gill said. "I taught to tell the truth, only the truth... The idea is to give as much information as you can so that the person who's reading that story can form their own opinion based on true facts."

It's important for journalists to report accurately and get both sides of every story. All the information needs to be available for people to make informed decisions.

That said, everyone has different views, so it is nearly impossible to remove all bias from the news.

"I think every news organization needs to

make money, and the way they make money is by having a readership they are trying to write to. So... I don't think that most of the mainstream media is intentionally trying to lie, but I do think that everyone's got their biases and you've just gotta know that kind of going in."

Bias does not necessarily make news untrue, but it means that the public needs to pay attention to the facts that are presented and make sure they know both sides of the story.

Still, the burden lies on journalists to make sure that both sides are there.

In her years of teaching journalism, Gill had two main messages for her students.

"One, to be ethical. And yes, do harm. Absolutely do harm, but do it based on truth. And the second thing is always dig deeper. Don't stop with one source. Or two sources. Don't stop with the people you know who are going to say what you want them to say. Always go to the end of the line, don't stop."

HOW MANY SOCIAL MEDIA USERS SEE FAKE NEWS?*

70% Facebook users
54% Twitter users
47% YouTube users
43% Reddit users
40% Instagram users

*Based on The Manifest 2019 Consumer Social Media Survey, conducted by Duncan McIntosh Company, Inc.