What If There Are No "Good" Sources of Information?

Considering a Paradigm Shift in Information Literacy Instruction

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ABSTRACT: The last decade has seen major shifts in culture, the information landscape, and library instruction. For most of that time, librarians have focused on helping students question information sources as a reaction to the rise in misinformation and disinformation and in response to specific requests from those who look to the library as a source of "good" information. Yet, students are still not critical enough of information that aligns with previous beliefs or hypercritical enough of information that does not, reinforcing polarized thinking. There has been a paradigm shift in the information environment and among our students: specifically, that our students' struggle with evaluating authority may stem from over-critical approaches to research and increasing lack of trust in expertise. If this is true, continuing to teach heavily deconstructive approaches is not only unhelpful, but it may also contribute to the issue. This session ended with some thoughts on ways librarians might engage kindness, curiosity, and generosity to adapt our instruction to this new paradigm.

There is a lot of conversation around the speed of change in the modern era. Whether or not you are considering the exponential growth of the internet or the likely number of jobs a student will work that have yet to be invented, we are all aware that life now is different from what it was last year, last decade, or last century. Librarians in particular are aware of this rate of change (and the things that remain the same), and for the most part have worked to stay current or even anticipate it. However, I believe that one aspect of our work no longer reflects the environment in which we operate: information literacy instruction, especially the evaluation of information and authority.

Let's begin by considering a traditional undergraduate student as a freshman in 2022. Many of us understand intellectually that they are digital natives and that they grew up in a world different from ours, but I suspect that we don't always fully contextualize those realities. For example, if our student was 18 years old in the fall of 2022, then they were likely born in 2003 or 2004. They would have been three years old when the iPhone was introduced in 2007.

Let's fast-forward to their first school "research project", say around second grade. Perhaps they had to make a poster on the water cycle, the Olympian gods, or brachiosaurus. This would place their first instruction about research methods and tools around 2011, the year that Wikipedia celebrated its tenth anniversary. *Encyclopedia Britannica* published its last print edition the year prior in 2010 (Bosman 2012)—they have been online since 1994. Kindle Direct Publishing had been launched four years prior in 2007.

I encourage you to really think about this environment for a moment. Wikipedia is well-established (as is the refrain to stay away from it for "serious" research). Ebooks are here, and the market for self-published works is beginning to thrive. Print reference is on the way out. Our student was still likely taken to a library and shown books, but especially when you add the ubiquity of Google and the smartphone (which dates to the time of their likely earliest memories), their cultural context for research is very different.

Let's keep moving. Our hypothetical student continues to seventh grade—the year 2016, when misinformation, disinformation, and fake news hit the cultural discourse. Librarians and teachers all begin to offer lessons on fact checking and critical analysis. Our student might get their first smartphone around this time—around 80% of their age group will have a smartphone when they start high school (Sandler 2021). They will be sophomores when the COVID-19 pandemic fully lands in the U.S., with its implications for learning, communication, and trust in experts. They have spent the second half of their traditional K-12 years in an information environment that may feel like it offers more questions than answers, surrounded by warnings against false information and worries about untrustworthy sources.

As we consider this student and their context, I'd like to raise a series of observations from my reading and experiences of the past

few years that lead me to believe we're operating in a new paradigm. I don't believe I have the whole picture at this time, but I see a broad picture taking shape. I also don't have a fully developed response to the shift, but I do have some questions, reflective challenges, and small changes that I believe could help librarians, especially librarians in faith-based institutions, better respond to this shift.

OBSERVATION 1: A NEW INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT NEEDS NEW RULES

In their excellent book *Verified*, Mike Caulfield and Sam Wineburg share a compelling argument for changing the way we teach information and media literacy, specifically pointing out that many of our current methods and preferences speak to an information environment that predates the internet. They point to the information environment of their childhoods, when there were more bottlenecks in information sharing, most with a standard mechanism for discerning authority. As they write, "The problem is that we left the three-channel-TV world years ago, but the skills many people learn today remain stuck there…. You may have been born in 2003, but you've likely been taught a media literacy approach from 1978" (Caulfield and Wineberg 2015, 3).

Don't get me wrong, I believe in teaching many of those 1978 skills to our students. Especially in areas like theology, they are still prevalent, and where they aren't obvious, they often underpin the structures of our newer systems. The problem is neglecting to contextualize those older methods and to add to them newer ways of navigating information as it is available now. Not only is it a disservice to our students, but it also raises questions about our own authority.

OBSERVATION #2: WINNING THE BATTLE, LOSING THE WAR

One of my favorite novels is *Ender's Game*, by Orson Scott Card. In it, Ender is sent to Battle School in space where he and his classmates are pitted against each other in zero-gravity war games. One of the many takeaways from the novel is that it is easy to over-complicate

and over-gamify an objective. For those of us who are in regular contact with student researchers, I'd like raise the following questions:

- What is the objective of education?
  - According to us (educators, librarians, higher education professionals)?
  - According to our culture (our media portrayals, broader cultural discourse, and conversations with our communities)?
  - According to our students themselves?

I'm a bit of an idealist. As a librarian, I'd say that the objective of education is to create lifelong learners who are equipped to meet the challenges of our future and to use their gifts in support of their communities. In contrast, I'd suggest that our culture largely tells our students that the objective of education is to get a good job, to be better workers, etc. Many of our students seem to have a sense that the objective of education is to succeed. For many, that looks like a job, but there's this almost nebulous sense of a college diploma being little more than one of the final stepping stones to adulthood and the American dream. This flattening and commodification of education can lead to gaming the system. In many ways, it's exactly what we've trained our students to do in order to meet us in the hallowed halls of higher education. Consider once more the hypothetical freshman of 2022. As they prepared their college applications, they were told to be careful of their GPA, to build a portfolio of extracurriculars and interests that would get them into college. Students who are worried about making less than an A aren't predisposed to ask risky questions or to engage in learning practices that might lead to failure. If everything is done in service of reaching the next goal, there's not a lot of room for personal development and squishy questions. This is how we end up with students who ask things like "Can't you just tell me what you want me to think?" in their general education classes.

In this context, let's also consider another set of questions:

- What happens if students fail to meet the objectives of education?
  - According to us?
  - According to our culture?
  - According to our students?

Again, in my idealistic space, I'd say that failure is a learning opportunity, and usually not that big of a deal. However, a student who fails a class or who fails to complete college is not seen favorably by our culture. Take a minute to think about the ways such failures are usually portrayed in television, books, or film—most of the characterizations are not nice. What about our students, who view the objective of education as getting to that successful life? Given the stakes they are holding for their education, failure in college suddenly feels much more fraught.

Additionally, it may be worth connecting this idea to that shifting information paradigm we already identified, specifically online communities and identities. A third related question arises: What do our students think happens when they are wrong (and what does "wrong" even mean)? In an information-rich online society, our ideas become part of our identity in a new way. In the absence of geographical boundaries, we form communities around ideas: they identify the edges of our groups and those who are other. If I profess the wrong idea in my online community, my connection to it is potentially weakened. I'm now not a perfect fit for my current community—I might even be part of some other group entirely. For our students, who spent so much time during the COVID-19 blip with little other than an online community, this potential loss is felt very deeply, and I believe it contributes even further to a desire to find "right" answers that will help them safely navigate to that end-goal of diploma and success (whatever that might mean). Without intervention, I think we have trained our students to "win" assignments and even classes, but possibly to "lose" on the overall objectives of a college education.

OBSERVATION #3: INFORMATION RICH AND ATTENTION POOR

There is plenty of literature out there on the importance of wonder, curiosity, boredom, and uncertainty (some examples include Fister 2022; Zomorodi 2017; and Turkle 2017), and as any modern American likely knows, these are states of being that are easy to avoid when we have the internet in our back pockets. Rather than speculate or problem-solve our way to answer trivia questions, we ask Siri. If we start to feel bored or lonely, it's easy to pull out social media and start scrolling. If we're uncertain, a few quick flicks can find

someone who is willing to confidently assert an answer. More than providing an easy way to avoid unpleasant affects, however, I believe that having quick answers in our pockets leads to two expectations of information that may also contribute to student behaviors in the classroom and library.

The first relates to the refrain to "research for yourself". On the one hand, I can get behind this phrase—it's encouraging students to research! On the other, there's this pernicious assumption that arises around it that suggests that any lay person can not only locate and access answers to any given question, but can understand and contextualize them across any possible subject. An example of this playing out is the freshman student with no medical training who wants to read literature on a medical diagnosis or condition, but rejects authoritative popular resources (e.g., the Mayo Clinic, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, etc.) as potentially biased or not primary enough in favor of medical literature in a database like PubMed.

The other expectation that arises is much less obvious, but I can see its effect across my consultations with students. If fake information exists—that is, information that is full of bias and unverifiable—then there is some sense that its opposite must also exist: information that is completely free of bias and fully verifiable. I don't think that anyone would actually claim this exists if questioned, but the suggestion of it can be seen in my consultations when students reject pertinent resources for a lack of this hypothetical perfection. I can remember one case of a student needing definitions of major tropes in anime series for a (relatively short) informative speech. The website *TVtropes.com* was rejected as a "bad source" because it was a 'dot-com' website. In several of my one-shots, I ask students to evaluate a variety of unconventional sources related to Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest (Wimer, 2023). No matter how I preface the assignment to tell them that they can use every source provided for something, I always end up with a string of criticisms and rejections, sometimes of sources that are actually extremely valuable for the prompt.

Finally, it may be worth considering cognitive load in the context of these expectations and the picture we're building of the modern student experience. Essentially, we have a resource allocation problem. Herbert Simon wrote in 1971 that attention is a limited and

precious resource, and it is consumed by information. He went on to state, "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it" (Simon 1971, 40–41). Without any training in how to allocate our attention, we're more likely to default to systems that ease cognitive load. Consider the researcher who encounters new information. One way to check its veracity is to compare it to existing knowledge or experiences. If attention is a precious resource, information that seemingly aligns with our existing beliefs may not seem to merit close examination. By contrast, information that feels less plausible (either because it is contrary to existing belief or because of its association with an "other") may merit extreme prejudice. Both responses allow quick processing of new information without too much attention needed. Without reflection and intention, our autopilots may reinforce our existing biases.

I believe that information literacy is a balance between critical and credible thinking (*credible* here meaning "believing"). An information-literate individual should ask critical questions of new information, but at some point, there must be some credibility placed in authority, especially in areas where the researcher lacks knowledge. For years (at least since our hypothetical student was in seventh grade), librarians and teachers and even the cultural discourse has been encouraging our students to think more critically, to distrust what they find on the internet, and to be careful of the dangers of misinformation. This makes a lot of sense, given the rise in polarization and misinformation that we've seen, but we're still seeing the same "non-critical" behaviors even as our students clearly understand how to critically take apart a given source. Add in the current trend of declining trust in authority, and a new possibility rises. I believe that our students aren't struggling with evaluating sources because they aren't critical enough; I believe that they are struggling because they don't know how to give appropriate trust and credibility to authority. If this is the case, continuing to push the critical approach (as is the trend in many information literacy curricula) may make the problem worse.

OBSERVATION #4: UNHELPFUL LIBRARY MYTHS

Finally, I think there are some myths (used here as "central tenets and ideals of a given group") around libraries and information that also must be considered in relation to the issues we're seeing. Some positive examples:

- "Library people are helpers."
- "Libraries are about connections."
- "Information creation is a process and scholarship is a conversation."

Some less helpful examples:

- "Library materials are always credible/ authoritative."
- "'Experts' are infallible (or think that they are)."
- "Information at the library is always better than information from the open web."
- "The internet killed the library."

Many of these examples relate back to Observation #1: that we're still operating (especially according to cultural perception) under an old information paradigm. There was a time when the books at the library represented one of the highest forms of authority easily available to the general public. Publication in a book that had been collected by a library suggested that information had passed several thresholds for fact-checking. Besides that, where else were you going to find a full list of the noble gasses or the official rules of Major League Baseball? However, our current paradigm is such that it's not only faster to find the state law on turning left when the light is red in *Oregon.gov*, it's likely to be more authoritative than anything in a booklet at the library, thanks to the ease of publishing updates online. This is a fairly logical process, and yet, I know I'm not alone in working with assignments for undergraduates that encourage them to pick topics like "White Hat Hacking" or "Weird Ways that Gerbils Die," but still require that they use peer-reviewed literature or books from academic collections and avoid citing websites.

CURIOUS GENEROSITY FOR OUR STUDENTS

So what do we do with each of these observations? What changes might help us adapt to the new paradigms and prepare students to engage with information as it exists now and in the future? I think the heart of the approach for me is one of curious generosity. I've become convinced that I need to check my defaults against each student who is actually in front of me and consider some of the following questions:

- Where are they really on information literacy?
- What has their education taught them to expect? To think is achievable?
- What pressures and emotions do they feel?
- What do they actually want to accomplish, and can we meet them in new ways to achieve those things?
- Where can we hold space and grace for them?

If we don't stop to take stock of where our students are, or if we don't offer them generosity and respect for their contexts, I believe our current approach will not achieve our actual objectives. I also think that there are some shifts we can make in our practice that might help us first to see the answers to these questions, and then to respond better.

"CRITICAL IGNORING" AS A SKILL

This is an idea proposed by a group of researchers that includes the previously mentioned Sam Wineberg, and they've published widely on it (Hertwig et al. 2023; Kozyreva et al. 2023). Essentially addressing the issue of information overload and the scarcity of attention, *critical ignoring* acknowledges that there is more information to receive than I have the capacity to process and encourages a researcher (or just a consumer of media) to be intentional about what they give their attention to. Many librarians are already talking openly about the demands for our attention, but I wonder if we could find ways to work this concept into more of our practices. One big part of this that we may be well-positioned to do is helping students acknowledge, understand, and honor the limits of their understanding and access to information. We already do some of this when we talk to students about scoping their topics. For example, if a paper on the

history of librarianship in the U.S. is only supposed to be ten pages long, one may want to focus on a particular era or region of the U.S. and ignore information (however excellent or interesting) that doesn't connect to that facet of the topic. Can we help translate this skill into the broader disposition of critical ignoring and foster more conversation (and hopefully awareness) on the issue?

KINDNESS TOWARD STUDENTS AND TOOLS

I believe that our students are operating in a learning environment that feels very high stakes and even occasionally hostile. No good learning happens when the student feels threatened, and I believe our best learning happens when we engage our communities in kindness. In fact, some research is beginning to suggest that engaging kindness boosts innovation (Borton and Fratantoni 2024). There are two places where I think library instruction can direct kindness: first to our students, and then to the information we encounter together.

One of the kindest things we can offer our students is to acknowledge them as people with existing knowledge, skills, and history. They do not come to us uneducated (even if their current understanding is not the one we wish they had). When met with utter dismissal of what I would assess as quality sources, my instinct is to double down and tell students that they are being overly critical, but when I manage to pause and acknowledge that they've done a good job spotting potential issues in the suggested resources, the conversation that follows can be one of continued learning rather than failure and frustration. They've done good work in finding the flaws; can they go a step further (welcome to collegiate-level research) and find the strengths?

We can also keep in mind that we are not the only voices they hear speaking about issues of information literacy. They are hearing comments, narratives, and sometimes even instruction about authority in research that we don't always have the power to alter. If I believe the best approach to authority is a balance between credible and critical, how can I be responsive to the strength and tenor of the approach they are hearing elsewhere?

Finally, we can model kindness toward our sources. One small shift I find useful in teaching evaluation of sources is to encourage

students to avoid asking whether it is a "good" source, and to focus instead on what they can learn from the source. Mark Lenker suggests asking students to consider how a source might enhance their understanding of a topic (Lenker 2023, 559). Both are ways of removing some of the stakes from the equation and offering kindness toward new information.

Another slightly larger shift to consider is to demonstrate uncertainty in research practice. There are times when having clean and practiced searches in our demonstrations is necessary, but if students never see the librarian encounter an error code or get unexpected results for a search string, how will they know what to do when they inevitably encounter these themselves? How will they feel about the resource or their own skills when this happens? Even when I do encounter these things, I don't always remember to explain what I'm seeing and how it's affecting my choices to my students. I'm very guilty of simply declaring a search string "bad," and trying a new set of keywords without sharing how even those "bad" results helped me to refine my strategy or suggested that I might need to try a new approach. I'm currently working to make these processes (and my feelings about them) more transparent, and hopefully normalized.

RESEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING

We've established that education may have become over-gamified as the pressures of making the grade and being seen as "right" and the emphasis on "verifying" information to a degree that may not be possible leads students to want clean answers for research projects. I believe that pursuing research for understanding is one of the most powerful approaches we can take in this environment (Full credit for this line of thinking should be given to Mark Lenker, whose recent paper in *Communications in Information Literacy* expresses this approach and the need for it: Lenker 2023, 554–572). Helping students to seek understanding of complex topics (rather than researching to find a "right answer") can better position all of us to do research as a form of exploration. If students are seeking understanding, it may feel safer to engage with unfamiliar information and even potentially incorrect information as part of the process rather than a threat to correct knowledge. Research for understanding can also help frame conversations around sources that are too advanced for

the student; if they aren't able to understand the source itself, how can it increase their understanding? Is there a different source that might help them better understand this one?

Not all of us have the ability to affect the assignments students bring to the library, but where we can, I think we should also advocate for research as exploration as an outcome in assignments. There is certainly a place for research papers and presentations with complete theses and persuasive rhetoric, but there is also plenty of benefit in assignments like annotated bibliographies, executive summaries of literature, and literature reviews to encourage students to seek understanding of complex topics and specific arguments rather than a particular correct answer, especially early in their academic careers or at the beginning of a new program of study.

I think we also need to talk more about the affective parts of research. It's uncomfortable to ask uncertain questions, especially if the asking-and-answering is being graded or otherwise judged. Mulaski and Bruce wrote a piece for *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* that makes a compelling case for "embracing academic discomfort" (Maluski and Bruce 2022). When "research" has previously been connected to the quick answer from a pocket Google, we may need to gently explain and continually remind our students that some of the best academic questions are going to result in uncertainty, frustration, uncomfortable questions, and even confusion. Advanced researchers don't stop feeling these; they simply understand them in context. This space of discomfort and uncertainty is also a place where librarians in faith-based contexts have additional tools. Whether by our own experiences and faith expressions or tools offered by campus religious leaders, our faiths can give us frameworks to navigate spaces of uncertainty and growth, and we should consider leaning on them as we work with our students.

CARE FOR OUR NARRATIVES

Finally, I want to offer some words of caution about the myths that we perpetuate in our outreach and instruction narratives. For every unhelpful myth we carry thanks to modern media (see also stern shushing), there are many that I think we may accidentally perpetuate or even create ourselves. For example, many of us are familiar

with discussions around information creation as a process. How often do we celebrate this process compared to the amount that we point out its flaws? I absolutely believe we need to encourage conversations about the limitations of our information thanks to our processes; but are there ways that we can encourage trust in good process even as we warn about the implications of those limitations? As part of this, I believe that librarians must continue to advocate for transparency and openness in scholarship and speak honestly with students about where we are in this process.

Frankly, I believe that in a bid to demonstrate our usefulness and relevance we sometimes oversell academic research. It's important to advocate for our work and our tools to our campuses, and this sometimes means de-emphasizing their limitations in our outreach, but if a student only ever hears us speak about how excellent library databases and academic literature is, what are they to think when they encounter poor usability, limited access, or even errors or limitations in the literature? If everyone on campus touts academic literature as the best (or even the only acceptable option), what are students supposed to do when the best information really isn't covered by our efforts, but should be supported by information from popular, trade sources, or non-traditional (such as primary or open source options) resources? Are there small tweaks we can make to our database pitches that contextualize their usefulness while acknowledging that they aren't necessarily helpful for all things? I believe that in engaging these questions, we can model a scholarly humility that might help foster trust and dialog with our students.

CONCLUSION

We are living at a time when information literacy feels like more than just the foundation for excellent academic or personal research. As librarians, we have an opportunity not only to teach our students how to do excellent academic research, but also to prepare them to take on the questions, uncertainty, joys, and responsibilities of navigating information in an evolving environment. I think it's time for our profession to carefully reflect on the context in which we're teaching and consider whether we're acknowledging existing strengths and meeting actual needs. I don't have a complete answer for how we will best move forward into the future of information

literacy, but I think our next steps will need to engage kindness, wonder, patience, empathy, and generosity. For those of us who are privileged to engage with these virtues in our faith or in our support of religious contexts, perhaps there is space for us to lead the way in developing the path forward.

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