INFORMATION & MEDIA LITERACY: SKILLS NEEDED IN TODAY’S WORLD

by Pam Friday, Director of Sales, Northeast Region & Canada
Over the past half century, extraordinary and accelerating digital innovation has brought about a truly global information society. This has radically changed information access and endangered previous standards of authority and reliability while straining the very educational and labor market infrastructures necessary to confront the momentous nature of this change.

Few areas have been as disrupted by this shift as information and media literacy. In an ever-growing Internet landscape, the accuracy of information is hard to verify and the authority of media sources is difficult to know, leaving students and workers ill-equipped to thrive.

**Defined: Information and Media Literacy**

- **Information Literacy**
  The ability to know when there is a need for information; to identify, locate, evaluate and use effectively that information for the issue or problem at hand.

- **Media Literacy**
  The ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication

**The Problem: Authority Lost**

The Internet produces fragmented media and information, with smaller and more personalized stories and sources, especially from social media, replacing more universal and centralized information, such as newspapers and reference books. This is what is known as new media’s “Long Tail,” which describes a broader pool of news sources, each being visited by fewer and more targeted users. Understandably, with fewer shared sources and experiences, there is less basis for consensus around a common set of information.

In this way, new technology not only offers too many choices to users, but it can also worsen the social trend known as group polarization. Facebook, Google and other new media companies use complex formulas called algorithms that can lead users into circular patterns that simply reinforce their initial beliefs rather than imparting new information.

The spread of so-called “fake news” is a great example of this trend, as demonstrated by the wide variety of hoaxes, propaganda and misinformation that was shared online during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and how willing people were to believe information that supported their original points of view.

Indeed, even as public confidence in other traditional authorities, such as the scientific and education communities, has remained stable, trust in the press has collapsed since the advent of the Internet. Confidence in newspapers and television news has fallen to meet the low regard of news found online, and today 32 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds get their news from social media, which is generally not reliable.

**The Problem: Falling Behind**

In the face of such major shifts in the media and information fields, it is not surprising to learn from a recent Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) survey that employers place a high value on information literacy and related skill sets yet find those skills lacking in recent graduates. Professional services jobs long ago replaced manufacturing as the major economic and employment driver of the Western world, and service-providing jobs now account for more than 80 percent of U.S. employment. In a world of advanced technology, these jobs increasingly require digital information literacy to support traditional literacy and numeracy skills, but few schools are preparing their graduates.

This problem is negatively impacted by several related issues, including a slowing in the hiring of librarians, itself a result of government budget cuts. Additionally, across the country, school administrators are filtering the Internet far more than is necessary or desirable, tying the hands of educators and creating a split between students who are privileged with unfiltered web access at home and those who are not.
THE SOLUTION: ASK A LIBRARIAN

Librarians are experts in information literacy and are the people best equipped to provide the practical and theoretical grounding students need to navigate an incredibly dynamic information ecosystem. In 2016, the American Library Association (ALA), through its Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) division, approved the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, which encourages college libraries to adopt in a flexible and institution-specific manner six “interconnected core concepts,” among them that authority is constructed and that information should be debated, to ensure best practices in information literacy.15

Librarians embody these ideas and are instrumental in advocating for them. They also, fittingly, view the Framework through their own individual, local contexts. According to Stefanie Claydon, Reference Supervisor at the Needham Free Public Library in Massachusetts, it is via a close relationship with schools that librarians can best improve students’ information literacy skills. Situated near a local public school, Claydon's library employs a young adult specialist reference librarian who educates students and teachers about available resources. They also reach out to the community at large and provide access to unbiased authoritative sources for everything from consumer reviews to research papers.16

At the Library of Michigan, K-12 Education Specialist Christine Schneider suggests that inadequate research skills can affect first-year students’ ability to keep pace, increasing the chance that they might drop out of college. She believes that educating teachers on the large variety of authoritative research databases offered is the best way to direct students’ learning.17

Some libraries, such as Media Services Manager Chad Clark’s Highland Park Public Library in New Jersey, also host media literacy forums to educate patrons on library research tools. Clark, like Claydon and Schneider, notes that getting librarians and teachers together is an invaluable strategy for combating poor information and media literacy, and it remains a great rule of thumb to, when in doubt, ask a librarian!18

ALSA'S FRAMEWORK FOR INFORMATION LITERACY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION.14

1 AUTHORITY IS CONSTRUCTED AND CONTEXTUAL: Authority is a type of influence, and it should be approached skeptically and with an openness to new perspectives

2 INFORMATION CREATION AS A PROCESS: The development of reliable information is the result of a process that is unique to every product

3 INFORMATION HAS VALUE: Information educates and influences, and it is very valuable in understanding the world

4 RESEARCH AS INQUIRY: The nature of research means always asking new and more complex questions

5 SCHOLARSHIP AS CONVERSATION: Ideas must be formulated and debated out loud in order to develop new insights

6 SEARCHING AS STRATEGIC EXPLORATION: Researchers must explore a range of information and be intellectually flexible to develop new understanding
FACTCHECK.ORG’S “HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS” TOOLKIT:

1 CONSIDER THE SOURCE: Often, determining the veracity of a news story is as simple as querying the source itself, especially on the web.

2 READ BEYOND THE HEADLINE: Headlines are by nature provocative, but even legitimate sources’ headlines are liable to not tell the whole story.

3 CHECK THE AUTHOR: An obviously pseudonymous or missing author byline is a major red flag for fake news.

4 WHAT’S THE SUPPORT: News stories usually support their claims with quotes or other references that readers can follow up.

5 CHECK THE DATE: Old news is exactly that: old, and undated reports should be taken with a grain of salt.

6 IS THIS SOME KIND OF JOKE?: Satire can be powerful, thoughtful, and funny, but it can also simply be misunderstood—after all, humor is subjective.

7 CHECK YOUR BIASES: Confirmation bias is challenging to confront but necessary to overcome in order to become a savvy media consumer.

8 CONSULT THE EXPERTS: When in doubt about a news story’s veracity, users should check in with sources they know and trust.

THE SOLUTION: ASK A FACT CHECKER

As technology has scattered information and social media has pulled users further from reliable news sources, a new genre of media criticism called “fact checking” has emerged, which is particularly useful for understanding political speech and reporting. However, the responsibility for this new type of fact checking falls squarely upon the reader, unlike the standard fact checking that occurs before publication.

Among the most reputable of these new sources, FactCheck.org is hosted by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center and around the time of the 2016 election laid out eight tools for interrogating media veracity, among them reading beyond headlines and checking internal biases. By using these tools and, when in doubt, consulting sources such as Factcheck.org, the independent Snopes.com, the Washington Post’s Fact Checker, and PolitiFact.com, supported by the Tampa Bay Times, readers can ensure the reliability of the media they consume, better understand their world, and make more informed ballot box and pocketbook choices.

THE SOLUTION: USE TRUSTED RESOURCES

Ultimately, whether users can rely on the information they encounter is about trust, and it can be very difficult for individuals to assess the trustworthiness of the news and media they find in the real world, even when equipped with handy toolkits and useful frameworks.

In these cases, it can be especially useful to turn to universally accepted and respected sources, particularly those that have been peer-reviewed (also called refereed or juried, which means that the information has been assessed by subject matter experts). These trustworthy sources are best found in academic and other juried databases, which can be accessed online or at public, school and college libraries.
Watch the webinar replay of “Information & Media Literacy: Skills Needed in Today’s World” based upon information from this paper, and sponsored by LearningExpress and Library Journal. VIEW WEBINAR

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Friday is a Director of Sales for the Northeast Region & Canada with LearningExpress, an EBSCO company. Her extensive knowledge of the digital learning field and LearningExpress eLearning resources keeps her actively involved with thought leaders in multiple markets, including public libraries, K-12 schools, academic institutions and workforce organizations. Her visits with libraries across the U.S. helps to keep LearningExpress online resources relevant and consistent with the needs of all patrons.

**EBSCO** Information Services, the parent company of LearningExpress, is the preeminent provider of online research content for libraries, including hundreds of research databases, historical archives, point-of-care medical reference and corporate learning tools serving millions of end users at tens of thousands of institutions. EBSCO is the leading provider of electronic journals and books for libraries, with subscription management for more than 360,000 serials, including more than 57,000 e-journals, as well as online access to more than 1,000,000 e-books.

EBSCO additionally has a pair of powerful and complementary offerings providing research tools. **EBSCO Discovery Service** delivers customizable resource indexing and streamlined searching, while EBSCOHoist’s comprehensive platform brings together a range of proprietary and licensed databases.

**LearningExpress** is a recognized leader in providing online academic and career content for the library and academic markets. It offers a range of products to help individuals develop vital information literacy and related skills.

Libraries throughout North America rely on LearningExpress solutions to help patrons build the basic skills needed for effective analysis and use of information, such as reading skills, logic and reasoning skills and critical thinking skills. A new Student Success Skills Center for high school and college students helps address information literacy shortfalls, featuring resources for understanding information literacy, finding good sources and improving research skills.

IN A WORLD FULL OF INFORMATION, STUDENTS AND WORKERS TRUST LIBRARIES TO DELIVER ACCURACY AND RELIABILITY, AND LIBRARIANS TRUST LEARNINGEXPRESS AND EBSCO FOR THE RESOURCES USERS NEED TO SUCCEED IN THE CLASSROOM AND THE WORKPLACE.

---

14.”Ibid.
16.”Information & Media Literacy: Skills Needed in Today’s World” webinar sponsored by LearningExpress and Library Journal (June 2017)
17.”Building Success Skills: A Solid Foundation for All” webinar sponsored by LearningExpress and Library Journal (February 2017)
20.”Ibid.