

TECHNOLOGY

The Librarian War Against QAnon

As “Do the research” becomes a rallying cry for conspiracy theorists, classical information literacy is not enough.

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Adam Maida / The Atlantic

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For too long now, shared reality has been fracturing before our eyes. Eli Pariser’s concept of the “filter bubble” is already a decade old. Yochai Benkler’s research

on propaganda networks finds that the roots of our epistemic crisis predate even the existence of the social web. The origins of this broken informational environment may be complicated, but the stakes are quite clearly life-and-death—and they prompt a question: How can so many people believe things that are obviously untrue?

Setting aside the fact that the people most likely to share misinformation haven't been in a classroom for decades, most students in the past 50 years have received instruction under various names: media literacy, digital literacy, news literacy, information literacy, civic literacy, critical thinking, and the umbrella concept of meta-literacy. This curriculum is constantly being reinvented to meet perceived crises of confidence, largely driven by the emergence of new technologies.

But the present moment demands serious inquiry into why decades of trying to make information literacy a universal educational outcome hasn't prevented a significant portion of the population from embracing disinformation while rejecting credible journalistic institutions.

This failure has many roots: The low social status of teachers and librarians relative to those in other professions, the lack of consistent instruction about information and media literacy across students' educational experience, the diminishment of the humanities as a core element of general education, and the difficulty of keeping up with technological change and digital culture have all played a role. So has the fact that information literacy has no specific place in the curriculum. It's everywhere, and nowhere. It's everyone's job, but nobody's responsibility. In many cases, the people who care about it the most—those in academia, journalism, and nonprofits especially—have had their jobs felled by the austerity ax.

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Since the 19th century, librarians, media-literacy advocates, and educators of all kinds have promoted independent research as a practice that helps students develop critical thinking and a disposition to be curious and engaged. But students have too often been treated as naive information consumers who, if properly trained, can make

sophisticated choices about what information they can use for a task. In the case of media literacy, audiences are often positioned as learning how to review news, ads, and video clips as savvy consumers. But these canned classroom situations don't necessarily transfer to more complex realities.

While school-based efforts to promote information literacy are typically tied to producing information (college papers, digital projects, PowerPoint slide decks), students are not as frequently invited to reflect on how information flows through and across platforms that shape and are shaped by participatory audiences and influencers. They aren't learning much about how information systems (including radio, print journalism, academic and trade-book publishing, television, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram) make choices about which messages to promote and how those choices intersect with political messaging and the social engineering of interest groups.

There's a good chance their teachers haven't learned much about this either.

Now that conspiracy theories have accelerated into the mainstream and competing notions of reality vie for attention, information-literacy advocates must acknowledge that focusing on how to find and evaluate information is not sufficient and may, if taught ineffectively, actually be harmful. What happens in classrooms under the banner of information literacy has to include an understanding of information systems: the architectures, infrastructures, and fundamental belief systems that shape our information environment, including the fact that these systems are social, influenced by the biases and assumptions of the humans who create and use them. Otherwise, educators and students will make no progress in healing our current crisis of faith.

We are experiencing a moment that is exposing a schism between two groups: those who have faith that there is a way to arrive at truth using epistemological

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practices that originated during the Enlightenment, and those who believe that events and experiences are portents to be interpreted in ways that align with their personal values.

As the sociologist and media scholar Francesca Tripodi has demonstrated,

many conservatives read the news using techniques learned through Bible study, shunning secular interpretations of events as biased and inconsistent with their exegesis of primary texts such as presidential speeches and the Constitution. The faithful can even acquire anthologies of Donald Trump's infamous tweets to aid in their study of coded messages.

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While people using these literacy practices are not unaware of mainstream media narratives, they distrust them in favor of their own research, which is tied to personal experience and a high level of skepticism toward secular institutions of knowledge. This opens up opportunities for conservative and extremist political actors to exploit the strong ties between the Republican Party and white evangelical Christians. The conspiracy theory known as QAnon is a perfect—and worrisome—example of how this works. After all, QAnon is something of a syncretic religion. But its influence doesn't stop with religious communities. While at its core it's a 21st-century reboot of a medieval anti-Semitic trope (blood libel), it has shed some of its Christian vestments to gain significant traction among non-evangelical audiences.

“Conspiritoriality,” a neologism coined in 2011 to describe the link between New Age spirituality and conspiracy theory, is an accurate name for the strange pathways QAnon takes into unexpected places. Consider, for example, that Instagram-influencer yoga instructors have become a vector for QAnon spread.

Social-media companies have gained enormous wealth and status by recommending paths of connections, incentivizing information production as a route to celebrity, and offering an infinite bazaar of consumer choice. It should give advocates of information literacy pause that, similar to the way the phrase *fake news* has been appropriated to disparage mainstream journalism, the slogan “Do the research”—now ubiquitous in anti-establishment and conspiracy-theory-friendly corners of the web—has become the empowering antidote to elitist expertise.

[Read: The Normalization of Conspiracy Culture](#)

Those who spend their time in the library of the unreal have an abundance of something that is scarce in college classrooms: information agency. One of the powers they feel elites have tried to withhold from them is the ability to define what constitutes knowledge. They don't simply distrust what the experts say; they distrust the social systems that create expertise. They take pleasure in claiming expertise for themselves, on their own terms.

Moreover, the internet gives them opportunities to create their own versions of scholarly societies, networked and engaged in building entire circulating libraries containing the fruits of their research. Their superpower is knowing how the internet works, so they can in turn successfully work the internet, nurturing and amplifying their truth by exploiting the attention-seeking tools of social platforms, strategically harnessing their online skills to penetrate real-world systems of power.

Years ago, in a trenchant critique of information-literacy theory and practice, the library- and information-science scholar Christine Pawley argued that we need to teach students “how information ‘works’”—not just how to find and select information as if it's a market good to be produced and consumed, but rather how to understand the social and economic contexts that influence how information is created and circulated. She further argued that we need to make clear the role individuals and groups play in “actively shaping the world in ways that render the

producer-consumer dichotomy irrelevant.”

Pawley wrote this critique at the dawning of the 21st century, before Web 2.0 promised a participatory social experience online and before Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played such a volatile role in our political culture. She was addressing librarians who were struggling to adapt their mental constructs to a world where information was going online.

A great deal has changed in the information environment since then, but too often what passes as information literacy continues to be instruction on how to satisfy the requirements of assignments that may explicitly forbid students from using information that doesn't pass through traditional gatekeeping channels. It's ironic that Wikipedia, a social platform once demonized by educators as unreliable, is now a global avatar of strict adherence to a set of retro principles about how to properly establish and document information through objectivity, references to authoritative sources, and appealing to generally accepted facts.

There's no doubt that it will be difficult to shift the information-literacy narrative from an emphasis on finding, evaluating, and using information in an academic setting to something that addresses a broader understanding of how information flows through systems. Our information systems operate in a complex world in which messages take root in dark corners and spread rhizomatically through connections that are usually hidden from view, a world in which power users discover hacks to trip up algorithmic systems in ways the authors of the algorithms failed to anticipate, a world in which the rules of the game change constantly while the consequences of systems designed to share information virally pose a serious threat to democracy.

It's time for a thorough revamping of the purpose of inviting students to engage in inquiry as a civic practice. Educators, including librarians who teach, will need to confront and clarify their own beliefs and assumptions about how they know what is real and what isn't. It will take work. But there are some promising places to start.

First, taking a leaf from an organization formed to advise journalists on how to cover

a divisive election, educators should consider ways to frame discussions of knowledge through the lens of democracy rather than through partisan political positions. This means being willing to take a strong stand on behalf of ethical research practices, the voices of qualified experts, and the value of information systems that judiciously vet and validate information, along with a willingness to clearly reject the notion that truth is simply a matter of political allegiance or personal choice.

Second, educators must be explicit about the ethical frameworks and daily practices of truth-seeking institutions such as science, scholarship, and journalism. Social-media platforms enact values that are firmly grounded in beliefs about individualism, capitalism, and consumerism. Educators must make clear how those values differ from the pursuit of truth through other means. Be humble about failures, but avoid allowing cynics to blur distinctions between the values and training of scientists, scholars, and journalists and the values of social-media corporations, television personalities, and internet influencers.

Third, as Mister Rogers famously said, “look for the helpers.” People in educators’ circles have a deep knowledge of intersecting information systems, or at least of parts of them. Scholars have been studying these systems and documenting their findings for years. Journalists too. There’s no need to research them yourself. Find the experts and develop communities to share ideas about teaching practices.

Fourth, the kids are all right. While they may not have much academic knowledge, and their technical understanding may be limited, among students in any given class there is likely to be a lot of knowledge about how information circulates through social media. Some students may have significant experience in measuring the reach of their own media messages. Connecting what they’re learning in class to their lived experience online may encourage students to share what they know and are learning about information systems with their friends and family beyond academia. Indeed, in focus groups conducted by Project Information Literacy in 2019, college students expressed concern about whether the younger people and elders in their life understood how social-media platforms work and how to recognize disinformation.

Today's students should be provided opportunities to learn from one another, to not only share knowledge but compare their experiences with different information systems and knowledge traditions as educators explain their own disciplinary practices, articulating and arguing for the values that undergird them. For example, students could be asked to describe their own practices online, their personal "code of ethics" as they navigate their social networks, and discuss those in comparison with codes of ethics from the [Society of Professional Journalists](#), the [National Press Photographers Association](#), or other disciplinary or professional societies.

As the science historian Jacob Bronowski wrote in 1973, "There is no way of exchanging information that does not involve an act of judgement." We've grown accustomed to many of those acts of judgment being made by algorithms that have a commercial goal in mind. Many students assume that is the way of the world, that every exchange of information must be financialized in a red-hot, high-frequency attention market. While professionals don't always live up to expectations, it can be illuminating for students to find out that there are traditions and practices that aren't entirely driven by a search for attention. They may even be surprised that their own motives for sharing information are more nuanced and ethical than social-media platforms assume.

It may be difficult, even impossible, to overcome an epistemological rift among Americans—one that was deliberately pried even further apart during the Trump years, culminating in a democracy-shaking insurrection—simply by changing how education approaches information-literacy instruction. But it's clear that we need to come up with a better answer to the question "Why isn't this something students learn in school?"

*This article was adapted from the author's [essay](#) for *Project Information Literacy*.*
