Truth, truthiness, triangulation: A news literacy toolkit for a "post-truth" world

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We were guaranteed a free press. We were not guaranteed a neutral or a true press. We can celebrate the journalistic freedom to publish without interference from the state. We can also celebrate our freedom to share multiple stories through multiple lenses.

But it has always been up to the reader or viewer to make the reliability and credibility decisions.

News literacy is complicated. In our attempts to discern truth, we are confounded by a 24/7 news cycle. News hits us across media platforms and devices, in a landscape populated by all degrees of professional journalists and citizen journalists and satirists and hoaxes and folks paid or personally moved to write intentionally fake news. All of this is compounded by the glories and the drawbacks of user-generated content, citizen journalism, and a world of new news choices.

Professional journalists themselves face new practical and ethical challenges relating to anonymity, privacy and safety, as well as reliability in their attempts to verify sources of breaking news from social media and user-generated content in all media formats. (The Verification Handbooks are a wonderful lens into this complicated process.)

Even news that is vetted by editors and publishers sometimes emerges from that process a bit processed, perhaps leaning in a particular direction.

On news literacy

In its glossary, Stony Brook University’s Center for News Literacy defines news literacy as:

The ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, television or the Internet.

Our kids need new types of filters. Beyond larger notions of information literacy, I see the case for a specific focus on news literacy. Not as a lesson of good vs. bad. Not as an attempt to pitch traditional media against social media or peer review against popular publication. Not through the examination of hoaky hoax sites. And certainly not as a one-of, checklist type of lesson for a 9th grade social studies teacher in September.

We need to teach the important lessons of everyday civics for new consumption and production landscapes. These lessons involve sustained critical thinking, a practice to engage in regularly as we read and view and inquire with
learners of all ages across disciplines.

A recent Stanford Graduate School of Education report, Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Literacy assessed the news literacy of students from middle school through college.

Students were asked to perform such tasks as: determine the trustworthiness of tweets, distinguish between news articles and opinion columns, identify ads on a news website, compare and evaluate posts from a newspaper’s comment section, identify the blue checkmark that distinguishes a verified Facebook account from a fake one, consider the relative strength of evidence presented by two posters in a Facebook exchange, decide whether or not to trust a photo on a photo-sharing website, determine whether a website can be trusted in an open web search, search to verify a claim about a controversial issue, assess the reliability of a partisan website, identify the strengths and weaknesses of an online video. (p. 6) (Note: Most of these tasks could authentically be taught in our libraries during the natural course of any inquiry project.)

The Executive Summary shared disturbing results:

By high school, we would hope that students reading about gun laws would notice that a chart came from a gun owners’ political action committee. And, in 2016, we would hope college students, who spend hours each day online, would look beyond a .org URL and ask who’s behind a site that presents only one side of a contentious issue. But in every case and at every level, we were taken aback by students’ lack of preparation . . .

Never have we had so much information at our fingertips. Whether this bounty will make us smarter and better informed or more ignorant and narrow-minded will depend on our awareness of this problem and our educational response to it. At present, we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish. (pp. 5-6)

I see a serious need for librarians to build a few seaworthy arks from the news media flood to aid students in discerning credibility, reliability, and bias in context of their information needs and the context of the text itself. I can see us introducing the broad notion of triangulation to children for whom the word may be difficult to say.

What’s going on?

Fake news

In the weeks leading up to the election we were drawn to stories about Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump and WikiLeaks’ confirmation that Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS.

Fake news is not new. But its potential for virality is and our awareness of it is newly awakened. Some suggested it played a role in the outcome of the election. Google and Facebook both announced that they would try to eliminate fake news from appearing in their result lists and newsfeeds by blocking fake news sources from using their ad networks.

And fake news is but one flavor of news that is less than accurate: It is but one bucket into which readers and viewers should sort types of truthiness.
Fake news itself comes in a variety of flavors:

- Pure fake news sites use fabricated stories to lure traffic, encourage clicks (click bait), influence or profit using intentionally deceptive, but highly intriguing, often sensational information.
- Hoax sites also share false information with the intention to trick readers/viewers
- Satirical sites present news with a comical, often exaggerated spin
- Born digital images and edited images alter and often misrepresent visual reality

In addition, sometimes journalists just get things wrong. Their sources they choose to interview may not offer truth or a full picture. Stories reported in process lack the wisdom of hindsight and may be missing full context.

Post-truth or truthiness

Oxford Dictionaries recently announced post-truth as its 2016 International Word of the Year. Oxford defines the word as relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

It is well worth noting that the concept is not new. Oxford traces post-truth’s history from a peripheral term simmering for at least a decade to its dramatic spike this year: in the context of the Brexit referendum in the UK and the presidential election in the US, and becoming associated overwhelmingly with a particular noun, in the phrase “post-truth politics.”

Back in 2005, Stephen Colbert introduced the Word truthiness, now defined by Wikipedia as a quality characterizing a “truth” that a person making an argument or assertion claims to know intuitively “from the gut” or because it “feels right” without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.

While we need to reject the notion of relying solely on from-the-gut verification systems, it is important to recognize that we are not always looking at a binary situation.

Credibility decisions are complicated. Most news is not simply fake or true. News from traditional sources can be suspect as well. Professional journalists engage in rigorous fact-checking and adhere to sets of professional ethics, but they are not entirely immune to bias or agenda or the pressures of a deadline. A single story may tell a part of a larger story at the moment of its publishing. Of course, traditional newspapers feature writing of all sorts—straight reporting, editorials, features, columns, advertisements and comments in their digital versions. Several traditional news sources are to various degrees either right or left leaning. While some admit their bias, others do not.

It is impossible to dismiss the complication that our political news consumption habits have shifted. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Reddit and Tumblr played huge roles in disseminating political information during the past election season. A May 2016 Pew Research Center study found that a majority of U.S. adults — 62% — get news on social media, and 18% do so often. In terms of the total population, this translates to social media news reaching 67% of U.S. adults.
of thumb—digital reading strategies, in fact—that will intrigue students, spark their curiosity, and serve as sensible entry points to more sophisticated analyses of ideas. Don’t miss the section on Weighing Truths in Wikipedia.


And finally . . .

Nurturing information literate, responsible, active citizens is what librarians do. There are no guarantees of truth from any source. We teach students to be discerning consumers of information. We teach them to deconstruct media messages and construct their own messages. We teach them to interrogate their sources. As the landscape continues to shift, librarians must update our own skill sets and toolkits to guide students in navigating a growingly nuanced universe of news. We must also examine and recognize our own biases so that we are open to contrary and conflicting ideas. This is our banner to wave, our curriculum to co-teach.

Of course, following the paths I’ve described for critical vetting of the news is work!

This is a new landscape from the one we taught in even five years ago. We need new compasses for navigation.

I do not believe we can stem the tide of fake news and truthiness and political memes and viral rumors and quick rushes to judgment. I do believe that together we can build a few arks.

Welcome to the brave new world of truth.