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Evidence and the Search for Truth

No one who is paying attention can fail to grasp that we are in an information firestorm. "Post-truth," "fake news," "alternate facts"—confusion escalates with every passing day. The same pieces of evidence result in differing and highly polarized interpretations. If there is a search for truth, it has become a search for personal truths, which are many and varied.

Controversy over the authority of information is certainly one of the biggest challenges of our day—and a growing nightmare for those of us teaching information literacy. The critical information literacy movement that emerged in the late 1990s was supposed to help people think more intelligently about the social, political, and economic factors underlying information, and it has done well in that regard. Yet "critical information literacy" relies on critical thinking using commonly accepted tools to evaluate what we are encountering. This kind of evaluation is becoming less common in our world.

The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy (ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframe work) contains the concept "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." It recognizes that it is up to the information receiver to determine the trustworthiness and usefulness of any piece of information. This is the arena within which we weigh reliability and make sense of the voices that are speaking to us.

This authority concept is not without its critics, particularly Nathan Rinne, who wrote "The New Framework: A Truth-Less Construction Just Waiting to Be Scrapped?" (*Reference Services Review*, v. *45* no. 1: 2017, pp. 54-66). He presents the articulate argument that any authority resting just on constructivism without supporting a search for truth is doomed to be "only a synonym for the successful use of power." I want to cheer on his argument, except that the word "truth" too often implies something we become so sure of, all discussion ends. (For Rinne's discussion with me on this issue, see his blog, Reliable Source (This Is a), at bit.ly/2PYlM8s.)

There are certainly elements of truth all around us: Red means stop; the internet is the main conduit for most of the world's information; and we bleed when cut. But "truth" as a goal can all too often become a beacon leading to dogmatism. When you've found what you believe is the truth, there is no room for discussion. And if each of us has a different version of "truth," we have a recipe for the fragmentation of society.

THE SOURCES FOR OUR DILEMMA

Let's leave the truth issue behind for a moment and look at the sources of our current information confusion as well as some potential solutions. Then we'll come back to Rinne's argument.

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1. Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias, our tendency to believe new information that confirms existing beliefs, is part of the human condition. On the positive side, it helps us find surety for our beliefs. On the negative, it works against assessing evidence carefully. We don't want to be found wrong, so we gravitate toward information that shows we were right. Our presuppositions shape our critical thinking, making it uncritical.

2. Conspiracy brain

All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have conspiracy brain, the kind of thinking that blames the negatives in our lives on external forces. We find it most prominently in a sense that things are getting very bad, that our cherished way of life is changing or being undermined, and that we are increasingly at risk because of factors beyond our control. These days, conspiracy brain is on steroids, primarily due to the power of the internet and social media. This causes us to distrust anything that remotely looks threatening or antithetical (confirmation bias alert) to what we know to be true. As David Brooks wrote in *The New York Times* on Dec. 26, 2019, "We don't necessarily disagree more. We perceive our opponents to be more menacing. We see more fearfully" ("The Media Is Broken"; ny times.com/2019/12/26/opinion/media-politics.html). In this environment, rational discourse, using evidence that leads to consensus, appears an increasingly distant hope.

3. Social media

Social media hasn't exactly met the expectations of its creators, to put it mildly. For every good experience of positively sharing ideas, images, and video, there are at least as many instances of weaponized information campaigns, trolls, conspiracy theories, and bullying. It was an illusion to think that social media, unmediated, would lead to endless "Kumbaya" moments. So now we have a glorious monster that is a perfect vehicle for viral misinformation.

Most social platforms are giving at least lip service to winnowing out the worse offenses, but it is pretty clear that, given confirmation bias and conspiracy brain, social media is an almost perfect vehicle to move falsehood right into the human heart. If it is true that the more outrageous information is more likely to go viral than mundane postings are, then we have a feeder for error. Other than blowing it all up, no attempts to rein in the false messaging are going to solve the problem.

Don't get me wrong. I use social media a lot and find it a great tool for scholarly discourse or keeping up with friends. But it's like your favorite dog who hasn't learned to stop biting the hand that feeds it. And we can't lay the blame on all those users who abuse the system. As Lily, the 18-year-old lead character in Sam Levinson's film, *Assassination Nation*, says after she becomes responsible for the viral release of a large amount of damaging information through social media: "Don't look at me. … I just got here." We who were at the beginning of all this let social media put profit above societal benefit. You should look at us. We're to blame.

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4. Search engines

I started using Google when it was in beta, when hardly anyone had even heard of it. Google, for me and the world, became a revolution. It was hard to believe that something so powerful was free. Turns out, it wasn't. It became a vehicle for the kind of commerce that has made Google a huge force. The key to its power was harvesting users' information so that the engine could personalize search in order to target ads to user preferences. That itself feeds confirmation bias through creation of filter bubbles.

But there is a deeper issue here: Search engines provide us with unmediated information. Unlike scholarship, where peer review is required, anyone's weird Uncle Fred can post whatever he wants online. If we lack the means to distinguish levels of authority, we are vulnerable to having lies fed to us and, if they confirm our biases, believe them regardless of their source. Between Google and its shady younger brother, YouTube, we encounter any number of falsehoods masquerading as reliable information. Today's younger generation knows it is being manipulated (see Project Information Literacy's latest study at projectinfolit.org/uploads/2/7/5/4/2754 1717/algoreport.pdf) but lacks the skills to fight back.

5. Denigration of authorities

The most disturbing challenge to certainty in our age is the increasing denigration of the experts, the people with experience to speak into our problems. Since the 1950s, expertise has increasingly been brought into question. It's become common for people to view experts as biased, authoritarian, elitist, out of touch—you name the accusation. The rise of digital access has only exacerbated the problem, leveling knowledge and its creators, so that we are much more likely to determine authority on the basis of what sounds right to us. Ours is the era of crowdsourcing, of do-it-yourself information navigation.

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What is even more serious is the rejection of authority by social media and politicians, who assert themselves by challenging the people who actually know things: the experts. Such critics feed a culture of distrust that diminishes formal authority and yet constantly fails to understand how expertise works to preserve and enhance our knowledgebase. Recently, a prospective student told me you can't rely on scholarly literature because it's been totally corrupted. Where did he get an idea like that?

SOLUTIONS

We could regulate or even break up social media. We could flag websites and posts that are misleading or false. We could make politicians liable for pronouncements that challenge previously recognized expertise. But that's a lot like trying to put out a forest fire with a bucket of water.

We could educate, but about what? Giving people information evaluation checklists can spark their thinking, yet the problem demands a stronger solution. We are buried in falsehood, so much so, that we may never be able to find our way past it to anything approaching truth.

As I think about my friend Nathan Rinne's critique of the authority concept in the Framework, I'm starting to come around to agreeing with him. We do need to be searching for truth, defined as what is substantially correct and in agreement with the best evidence. But I don't think it's a simple path in our diverse world. Let me suggest this: We need to return to a world in which we trust the expertise of those who know.

This is not a return to paternalism, when the experts pronounced, "We know better than you because of our education and experience, so we will tell you how it is." That gets us nowhere. What I'm talking about is the power of a circle of expertise and the methodology of that circle. Experts operate within a guild, a consortium of people who share the same kind of expertise and methodology. They critique and judge the contributions of one another according to standards that have stood the test of time.

This does not mean that we must insist that students use only scholarly, peer-reviewed literature. Rather, we must insist that they test for expertise by determining the qualifications of authors and looking for signs that the information they are viewing has corroboration from others in the same field of knowledge.

A WAY TO THE TRUTH?

We need to honor our experts. Really. In our information literacy instruction, we need to show why good methodology done by well-educated and experienced people is to be valued far above something the crowd agrees with.

Certainly, expertise can be rife with elitism, old boy networks, cultural biases, and even fraudulent research data. But that's common to the human condition. Most experts I know are doing their best to stay true to the methodology of the guild and to ensure that their work will stand the tests of their colleagues. A discovery that an expert's work is flawed or fraudulent is a good thing. It means that the guild is functioning as it should, and shoddy efforts will be caught. Nothing is perfect, but this is as close as we can get to achieving certainty, even something approximating the truth.

Just remember that everything experts know is open to challenge by other experts. That is how the best knowledge environment works, ever being tested with new evidence, ever being nuanced with better understanding. When we lose the web of expertise that can make our information properly testable, we lose the very foundation of our society.

It is no good arguing that we have found the truth, so there's nothing more to question. All of what we know now must always be open to challenge, to newly found evidence, to new understandings of existing evidence. This is demanded by the quest for what is real, even what is finally truth.

IT COMES TO THIS

For those who believe in divine revelation, truth comes from outside and is unassailable. This is something we can discuss outside of this column. But for those functioning within today's world of information, there is only one reality that we can trust, as shaky as that trust may sometimes become: the circle of expertise. Whether it is scholarship or journalism or whatever plumbers do, the guild, that company of people devoted to a method and to checks and balances, is our ground of certainty. When a scholar proposes an idea with evidence, that evidence is questioned, challenged, or supported by other members of the scholar's guild. And so, stage by stage, that idea matures.

If I have one message for teachers of information literacy, it is this: Affirm, explain, and promote our society's circles of expertise. In the mix of their conversations, we approach the truth.

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