

Eastern Michigan University

DigitalCommons@EMU

---

LOEX Conference Proceedings 2020

LOEX Conference Proceedings

---

2022

## **Seniors Seeking Information: Creating an Information Literacy Workshop for the Elderly to Fight Against Fake News and Misinformation**

Nicholas A. Casas

K.T. Lowe

Patrick M. Johnson

Amanda Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2020>

---

## Seniors Seeking Information: Creating an Information Literacy Workshop for the Elderly to Fight Against Fake News and Misinformation

Nicholas A. Casas, Indiana University Northwest (Assistant Librarian for Teaching and Learning)

KT Lowe, Indiana University East (Assistant Librarian for Instruction)

Patrick M. Johnson, Indiana University Northwest (Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator, Department of Communication)

Amanda Smith, Indiana University Northwest (Assistant Director, Center for Urban and Regional Excellence)

### Introduction

*“In general, our political culture seems to be increasingly populated by people who espouse outlandish or demonstrably false claims that often align with their political ideology.”*

- Gordon Pennycook, NY Times, January 19, 2020

Colleges and universities rely on campus-community partnerships in order to thrive. As part of their good citizenship, it behooves academic institutions to play a strong role in community education, a practice that, with care, can support the missions and goals of these institutions while remaining resources of trust for those they serve. Along those lines, higher education is uniquely capable of fighting community misinformation, not merely on the student level, but toward adults and senior citizens as well.

What this paper’s authors propose is that academic libraries should help play a role in educating specifically senior citizens to identify misinformation and find better coverage for their media consumption and information needs. One argument against these efforts is that this is an opportunity for public libraries to embrace and academic libraries should continue to focus their efforts with students. We disagree; it should be noted that the need for community information is perhaps more crucial than for college students. Younger-aged traditional college students (roughly 18-22 years old age) are digital natives and research has demonstrated that, while some of their skills may be less developed than expected (Wineburg, 2017), they still perform better than seniors aged 65 and older when it comes to identifying misinformation (Gottfried, 2018). Meanwhile, senior citizens spread misinformation seven times more than their younger counterparts (Guess, 2019). Additionally, while senior citizens and voters ages 18-29 make up similar proportions of the electorate, seniors over the age of 65 vote up to 71% of the time in both midterm and general elections, compared to a top voting rate of 46% for the youngest voters (File, 2017). Therefore, senior citizens maintain a disproportionate influence on policy and local laws, making information literacy skills even more important. Last, because many colleges and universities rely heavily on local communities for programming, partnerships and—in some cases—monetary support, providing access to information literacy skills and resources

in any format can only benefit the university. This paper discusses the efforts of Indiana University Northwest and Indiana University East, two distinct campus and community cultures, and their introductory efforts to battle misinformation among seniors.

## **I: Background - Mueller Investigation**

As early as 2013, the World Economic Forum identified fake news as a global threat (World Economic Forum, 2013). In 2019, special counsel Robert S. Mueller III indicted thirteen Russian nationals for interference in the 2016 United States general election (US House of Representatives, 2019). To the average American, this seemed somewhat moot: were these Russian nationals going to be arrested and tried on US soil? The indictment, however, has three important elements to it: prohibit them from entering the US and allies or face arrest; make their actions against the US a matter of public record; and, most importantly, learn how these Russian nationals interfered with these campaigns. Through a “troll factory” known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the Russian nationals distributed social media bots which spread misinformation, created memes that divided Americans, and even helped popularize specific political rallies (Parlapiano & Lee, 2018).

After his report was released, Mueller testified before Congress on July 24, 2019, reiterating its main points. Rep. Will Hurd (R-TX) asked a compelling question that seemed to pique Mueller’s interest, specifically citing the IRA posing a significant threat to the US and allies. Mueller stated that Russia was interfering in the 2016 general election campaign, and were planning to continue their work throughout the 2020 campaign as well. “They’re doing it as we sit here,” he stated. “And they expect to do it during the next campaign” (US House of Representatives, 2019).

## **II: Indiana University Northwest and CURE**

Information literacy workshops for senior citizens is a way for academic libraries to engage their communities. Public libraries that serve the same community as academic libraries may or may not already be doing this type of programming. If so, this could be a window of opportunity to collaborate and supplement public library services including applying for grants, shared programming, and as a marketing opportunity for the university. For state-funded colleges and universities, these institutions may have a mandate to serve their community. Indiana University Northwest (IUN) created the Center for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE) for this purpose.

Indiana University Northwest (IUN) was established in 1963 in Gary, Indiana. Gary, located in Lake County, has an estimated population of 74,879 and it is part of the Chicago metropolitan area within the State of Indiana, called “the Region” (US Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2019). The Region is one of the few deeply liberal pockets of Indiana, with Hillary Clinton winning 58.4% of the vote in Lake County (Indiana Election Division, 2016) in the 2016 General Election. Senior citizens make up 17.9% of the county population (US Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2019).

CURE at IUN engages the University and the community in the creation of positive, sustainable, and impactful programs and initiatives. CURE works collaboratively with organizations in all sectors of society to promote continued learning, solution-based interaction, and mutually beneficial partnerships in our communities. Since its inception in 2004, CURE has worked to support the community, faculty, staff, and students in forming long-term partnerships, which serve as the foundation of engagement activities.

An important element of CURE’s community outreach work centers on fulfilling the mission of a program it offers called Senior University, which is to provide educational, social, and engaged learning opportunities to seniors (persons aged 55 and over) residing in Northwest Indiana communities. For nearly two decades, seniors have participated in and benefitted from this programming delivered by IU Northwest. In 2012, the responsibility for designing and delivering Senior University was integrated into CURE and is now an important part of a comprehensive approach to campus outreach programming. The inclusion of the program into CURE enabled not only the continued delivery of programming on-campus, but also the expansion of the program to locations frequented by seniors, including local senior centers and community locations (such as public libraries, churches, etc.).

The Senior University program offers a diverse selection of intellectually stimulating sessions, the majority of which can be classified into one of the following areas: Arts & Culture, Business & Finance, Computers & Technology, and Health & Wellness. The range of topics within these categories is broad, reflecting the varied interests of Northwest Indiana seniors. Examples of specific offerings include “Business Building Basics,” “Introduction to Smartphones,” and “Writing through Grief.” Such sessions provide seniors with significant opportunities to develop skills and build their knowledge in areas of personal interest. As a result, seniors’ lives are changed in ways that improve their overall quality of life.

In order to continue growing the program, CURE works collaboratively with its many Senior University partners and the Senior University Steering Committee. Comprising six Senior University participants/community members, the Steering Committee fulfills its commitment to building community around Senior University by regularly engaging in outreach to fellow seniors. In addition to these efforts, information about program offerings is shared through the CURE webpage and Facebook page, as well as through news releases distributed by the IUN Office of Marketing and Communication. Regular notices with session information are also distributed to individuals and organizations on CURE’s Senior University mailing list.

Seniors Seeking Information

### **III: Indiana University East**

Indiana University East was established in 1971 in Richmond, Indiana, the county seat and largest city in Wayne County. Richmond, located in east central Indiana, shares a border with Ohio, and IU East serves an 11-county area including three counties in west central Ohio. The area is mostly conservative, with 62.7% of voters voting for Trump in 2016 (Indiana Election Division 2016). 18.9% of the city's 35,353 residents is made up of seniors 65 and older (US Census Bureau QuickFacts 2019). In addition, the city has a high level of lower income residents, with 42% within 400% of the federal poverty line (United Way, 2018).

Because IU East has no community outreach program similar to CURE at IUN, the library relies heavily on local partnerships to deliver community-oriented programming. IU East Campus Library has worked extensively with Richmond's public library, Morrison-Reeves Library (MRL), with programs ranging from presentations on the history of chocolate to discussions of police relationships in the Latino community. Library employees have also volunteered with MRL events, such as One World One Plate, a global food tasting event. MRL, therefore, was a natural partner for a fake news workshop, considering its focus on the community and its longstanding commitment to programming for senior audiences. MRL completed the marketing and much of the promotion for the workshop as well.

### **IV: ACRL Framework and SIFT**

To develop these information literacy workshops for senior citizens, two guiding principles and pedagogies were used. The first is the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education and the second is the SIFT Method first proposed by Michael Caulfield of the University of Washington Vancouver. Both are instrumental in terms of developing both background knowledge, purpose, and skills.

The two sections of the ACRL Framework that are of particular value to confronting misinformation are 1) Authority Is Constructed and Contextual and 2) Information Has Value. For Authority Is Constructed and Contextual, the novice "respects the expertise that authority represents while remaining skeptical of the systems that have elevated that authority." The expert student "views authority with an attitude of informed skepticism and an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought" (American Library Association, 2016). Traditional media (including cable news sources) in tandem with new media (such as social media) are slowly diminishing faith in institutions. This is causing this frame to become more challenging to teach based on today's high political climate and access to all types of information with all levels of authority.

For Information Has Value, expert level students "understand that value may be wielded by powerful interests in ways that marginalize certain voices. Value may also be leveraged by individuals and organizations to effect change and for civic, economic, social, or personal gains"

(American Library Association, 2016). Part of the reason why misinformation exists (other than an agenda) is that it generates money through subscriptions, clicks, and advertising revenue (Pfundt & Morris, 2019). The IRA and other misinformation peddlers use misinformation to influence foreign elections and sway public opinion in their desired favor. In other words, information has become a commodity like money, weapons, and resources such as oil and precious metals. Information literacy programming for senior citizens must contain this element.

The SIFT Method by Michael Caulfield is an effective method to teach anyone, including senior citizens, how to be present and aware when consuming information quickly. Sometimes it is helpful for some learners to compartmentalize steps. It is not telling learners what information to consume, but how to consider information more thoughtfully, which can lead to longer-lasting positive information outcomes. The SIFT Method consists of four steps: Stop, Investigate the source, Find trusted coverage and Trace claims to their original source (Caulfield, 2017). This brief series of steps are intended to be implemented without a significant investment of time over a broad spectrum of news sources and provide a reasonable assurance of accuracy.

### **V: Seniors and Misinformation**

When it comes to susceptibility to fake news, Guess et al. (2019) suggest more than mere ideology is at work. What makes their findings intriguing is that they identified demographic traits as a possible indicator of vulnerability to misinformation. The study involved examining the online behaviors of Facebook users during the 2016 election season, and the key factors which stood out were not political affiliation as much as age. Seniors 65 and older, even when controlled for education and political beliefs, shared fake news up to seven times more often than Facebook users ages 18 to 29, and 2.3 times more often than those ages 45-65.

It should be noted that the majority of fake news generated in the 2016 election cycle was intended to appeal to conservative readers. While Guess et al. contend that fake news is rarely shared overall, the team noted that the older the person, the greater the likelihood that that person would share a fake news story. They recommend a stronger focus on older adults and media literacy, although they also acknowledge that older adults process memory in such a way as to increase their susceptibility to false information. This consideration is shared by others (Patihis et al., 2013; Wylie et al., 2014), which may affect teaching strategies for older adults. More research would enable us to comment further on this particular finding.

### **VI: Workshop Model and Assessment**

Along with executing these information literacy workshops for senior citizens, the authors wanted to see whether or not political beliefs play a role in assessment and if ideology colored the perceived usefulness of the workshops. After workshops were to be conducted, an assessment survey would be provided to gauge these elements.

Before the coronavirus related shutdown of both IU East and IUN, one workshop was completed on Tuesday, March 10, 2020 at MRL in Richmond. The workshop was broken down into five distinct parts:

1. A concise history of fake news, with examples pulled from the diary of John Adams and a brief discussion of the fairness doctrine and its impact on local news sources
2. An explanation of modern fake news, which is spread much more rapidly than in the past as a result of social media and internet communication (World Economic Forum, 2013)
3. A description of the SIFT Method
4. Examples to practice
5. Additional tools and resources

This first workshop was intended to serve as a test to see if the information made sense to seniors and if their proposed structure was effective for seniors. The biggest issue was a technology divide—while the links to the workshop practice examples were provided to participants on a sheet of paper, we quickly discovered that many of the participants were not sufficiently proficient with smartphones and tablets to complete the practice examples on their own. Instead, these were completed as a group, with participants noting red flags and questionable content where appropriate.

Eleven people attended, ten over the age of 65, and nine completed the post-workshop survey. Our results were surprising in two major ways. First, while Richmond itself is centered in a mostly conservative region, all but one respondent stated that they were liberal or moderate. All of the respondents voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016.

While we are still trying to interpret this finding, we have noted that this may mean a few things:

- *That conservatives are more likely to perceive fake news as a problem, but respond in unexpected ways.*  
In 2019, the Pew Trust surveyed over 6000 Americans, and 50% of them said that fake news was a major problem. However, of this percentage, 68% were Republicans, and 58% of these conservative respondents, as opposed to 30% of liberal respondents, said that the media generated plenty of fake news. Interestingly, 69% of conservative respondents said that it was also the media's responsibility to fix the fake news problem (Mitchell, 2019). Since fake news is a heavily media-driven topic, and conservatives are reporting higher levels of media distrust, this could affect the interest or willingness of conservatives to attend a workshop based on media and fake news.
- *Seniors in general are less likely to go to the library in general.*  
According to a Pew Trust report on libraries, adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are the most likely to go to the library for any reason, including checking out books, using computers and taking advantage of services (Horrigan, 2016). 53% of Millennials visited a library in the past year, as opposed to only 40% of seniors age 65 and older. Because of this, they may have not heard about the workshop in the first place, indicating a need

for alternative forms of promotion and the possibility of seeking alternative venues to the library.

Regarding the confidence of the participants, two of the nine had reported lower confidence than when they entered the workshop, even after acknowledging that the examples and tools they learned would be useful. Again, this finding requires further research, but it suggests that the scope of misinformation can be overwhelming for participants.

## **VII: Conclusion**

For the future of these workshops, there are considerations and modifications that will likely need to be made. First, the scope of these workshops likely should be expanded in order to harvest more data. For IUN, this includes working more with CURE to expand to more parts of Lake County, including senior centers, nursing facilities and civic centers. For IU East, a range of senior centers and facilities will be targeted, along with continuing work with the local public library. Additionally, because of the potential for bias regarding the role and intent of universities in the community, we need to determine how prominently IU's name will appear on promotional materials. We are also concerned that the university's name may affect responses on survey assessment forms, although we are unable to determine yet if this is a major concern. It could also be an unforeseen benefit because the Indiana University brand is well-known within the state.

Since Indiana is in the midst of a pandemic and most community resources and higher learning institutions, including ours as of this writing (May 2020) are currently closed, we will have to consider how we are going to implement these workshops for the rest of 2020 and early 2021. At this time, two models are being considered—an all-digital format possibly using Zoom and a face-to-face format using small groups. There may be challenges to the all-digital method such as technical difficulties and the digital divide, particularly in the IU East region with its large rural population. These considerations, however, do not dissuade us from our work. The ultimate goal for us is ensuring that, once seniors complete the workshop in whatever format that proves feasible, they can apply their information literacy skills in the real world. As soon as it is possible, we intend to continue our work.

Sources cited:

- Caulfield, M. (2019). Introducing SIFT, a four moves acronym. Hapgood. Retrieved from <https://hapgood.us/2019/05/12/sift-and-a-check-please-preview/>
- File, T. (2017). Voting in America: A look at the 2016 presidential election. US Census. Retrieved from [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting\\_in\\_america.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html)
- “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education - Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).” (2016). American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework> (Accessed May 1, 2020)
- Gottfried, J. & Grieco, E. (2018). Younger Americans are better than older Americans at telling factual news statements from opinions. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/23/younger-americans-are-better-than-older-americans-at-telling-factual-news-statements-from-opinions/>
- Guess, A., Nagler, J. and Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*
- Horrigan, J. (2016). Libraries 2016. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/09/09/libraries-2016/>
- Indiana Election Division. (2016). Indiana Election Results. Retrieved from <https://enr.indianavoters.in.gov/archive/2016General/index.html>
- Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Sticking, G., Walker, M., and Fedeli, S. (2019). Many Americans say made-up news is a critical problem that needs to be fixed. Pew Research Center, <https://www.journalism.org/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/>
- Parlapiano, A. & Lee, J. C. (2018, February 16). The propaganda tools used by Russians to influence the 2016 election. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/16/us/politics/russia-propaganda-election-2016.html>
- Patihis, L., Frenda, S., LePort, A. K.R., Petersen, N., Nichols, R.M., Stark, C.E.L., McGaugh, J. L., Loftus, E.L. (2013). False memories in superior autobiographical memory. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110 (52) 20947-20952; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1314373110
- Pennycook, G., and Rand, D. (2019). Why do people fall for fake news? *New York Times*, January 20, 2019

Pfundt, A. & Morris, A. (2019). Breaking free of curricular confines: Seeking new opportunities to teach critical media literacy in the era of “fake news”. ACRL Annual

United Way (2018). Alice in Wayne County. [https://www.dropbox.com/s/l71rarwaglo0332/18UW\\_ALICE%20Report\\_COUNT\\_Y\\_IN\\_8.9.18.pdf?dl=02019](https://www.dropbox.com/s/l71rarwaglo0332/18UW_ALICE%20Report_COUNT_Y_IN_8.9.18.pdf?dl=02019).

US Census Bureau QuickFacts. (2019). *Gary city, Indiana*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/garycityindiana>

US Census Bureau QuickFacts. (2019). *Richmond city, Indiana*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/richmondcityindiana/PST045219>

US House of Representatives. Committee Repository (2019). Hearing: Former Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election. Retrieved from <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/IG/IG00/20190724/109808/HHRG-116-IG00-Transcript-20190724.pdf>

World Economic Forum (2013). Digital wildfires in a hyperconnected world. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/>

Wylie, L. E., Patihis, L., McCuller, L. L., Davis, D., Brank, E. M., Loftus, E. F., & Bornstein, B. H. (2014). Misinformation effects in older versus younger adults: A meta-analysis and review. In M. P. Toglia, D. F. Ross, J. Pozzulo, & E. Pica (Eds) *The Elderly Eyewitness in Court*, Psychology Press.