

I WANT MY NYT! USING APPS AND NEWS DATABASES TO HELP STUDENTS GAIN NEWS LITERACY

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BACKGROUND

Since the 1990s, newspapers have struggled to find a way to provide online access to their publications and still remain profitable. For many years, major newspapers provided free online access to their papers, financed primarily by advertising revenue and print subscriptions. Today, most major daily newspapers have transitioned to a "pay as you go" model where readers can access a select number of articles for free before paying for a subscription.

As newspapers reduce their free online content, the University of Chicago Library has found that our students (who have become dependent on reading their daily paper for free) are now approaching our librarians with questions such as:

- “Can I have the password for the *New York Times* website?”
- “How can I access the Library’s subscription to the *Chicago Tribune*?”

Libraries have long provided online access to newspapers by subscribing to resources such as *LexisNexis*. But with such easy access to newspapers online, many of our students do not consider the Library as a source for news until they are forced to pay for content.

Along with inquiries about accessing daily newspapers, our librarians have also noted an increase in questions regarding online access to older newspapers. Students search newspaper websites for historical issues, and fail to find the articles they want or are asked to pay-by-the-article to access archives. Often students are unaware of (on the one hand) the variety of digital newspaper archives available to them, or (on the other) that historical issues of the newspaper they need may not be available online or indexed. In many cases, students are shocked to discover that they may need to use microfilm.

Further complicating the news landscape for students is an increase in the use of mobile devices on campus. More and more Chicago students arrive on campus wanting to use news apps on tablets and smartphones. This became more apparent when the University of Chicago’s IT Services began loaning iPads to students. The top requested apps for the University’s iPads are for newspapers, including the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*. Few students know that these apps require a personal account with the newspaper to access its content, and approach the Library reference desk to obtain the login and password.

With this influx of questions, it has become clear that our students are unaware of the many news resources available to them. But the issue moves beyond the desire for free access to the daily paper. Many student patrons have little understanding of intellectual property or issues of information access. Our university students, both graduate and undergraduate, lack basic news literacy skills.

WHAT IS NEWS LITERACY?

News literacy refers to a set of abilities similar to those entailing media literacy, but applied to the news genre. In education and library science literature, the terms *news literacy* and *media literacy* occasionally are used interchangeably. Badke disambiguates media literacy from information literacy and information and communication technology (ICT), but does not separately define news literacy (Badke, 2009). Hobbs (1994) describes these overlapping sets of competencies as “a child with a thousand names.” Aufderheide (1993) provides a widely cited definition of media literacy: the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms. News literacy entails these same skills, emphasizing the abilities to analyze and evaluate the bias, reliability, and/or perspective of news reports and sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most news and media literacy curricula in the United States are geared toward primary and secondary education. These programs have not been fully adopted by educators (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2005). In higher education, even fewer media literacy curricula exist. Schmidt (2012) writes that “the implementation of media literacy curricula in post-secondary higher education is still in its infancy stages” (p. 64). Schmidt lists possible reasons such as confusion among instructors as to what media literacy is and the perception that “digital natives” require no media literacy instruction. Exacerbating the problem, existing adult media literacy curricula emphasize analysis and evaluation of media, neglecting the abilities to access media and communicate effectively through various modes (Schmidt, 2012). Based on these factors, college students may receive little to no media literacy training and may lack essential skills.

However, the absence of formal media literacy education can be an opportunity for libraries. On a college or university campus, the library often is responsible for licensing news sources, fielding reference questions about specific news stories, and collaborating with other campus units and outside vendors to design content portals that bring together various types of media. These existing responsibilities can provide a foundation for librarians to provide instruction in media literacy and efficient use of news resources.

DEVELOPING A NEWS PROGRAM

Newspapers, unlike many library resources, are used both for personal use and scholarly research. While some fields (such as history, public policy, or political science) rely on news sources more than others, newspaper use crosses nearly all disciplines. With such a broad user base, the Library considered different ways to reach the diverse groups of students who might benefit from a news literacy program. We believed a workshop format, open to both graduates and undergraduates, would be the best way to start. For the workshop, we developed the following outcomes:

- Students will know the different mediums for reading newspapers (print, websites, databases, microfilm, and apps).
- Students will learn about the economics of newspaper publishing and access models.
- Students will learn how to locate articles from news databases.
- Students will understand the difference between current and historical newspaper databases, including dates of coverage, languages, types of online format, and search limitations.
- Students will learn about two news apps for mobile devices on different platforms.
- Students will understand what news aggregators are and the differences between them.
- Students will understand how to use RSS feeds for news access.

- Students will learn about the impact of social networking on news (filter bubbles).

As part of the program, we felt it was important to include hands-on experience using news apps and databases, broadening participants’ understanding of the different ways to access news resources.

PLANNING THE PROGRAM

Our first news literacy program was part of a brand new outreach series co-sponsored with our campus IT Services called “Tech Treats,” focusing on new technology and web-based resources. Tech Treats were held in a joint Library-IT Services training space in the Joseph Regenstein Library and were intended to capitalize on the two units’ complementary expertise. The programs were offered in the late afternoon and provided snacks. Tech Treats were designed to be drop-in experiences, allowing participants to learn, socialize, and have a hands-on experience with tools or equipment they may have never used before. We felt this was ideal for a news program that featured tablets and smartphones whose ease of use might entice participants to try something new.

Since the Library lacks tablets for training purposes, we arranged with IT Services to reserve three iPads for the event, one for presenting and two for hands-on use by students. The first challenge was arranging for the apps we needed for the program. IT Services had a small budget for purchasing apps through the iTunes store. We suggested two news apps: Flipboard, a “magazine-like” news reader/aggregator, and Pulse, an RSS reader. We selected these apps by reviewing popular technology recommendations from sources such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* blog, “ProfHacker” (Jones, 2010). We helped make the case for purchase of the apps by describing their applications not only for teaching but also for use by students who borrow iPads through the IT Services lending program. Because the apps fit the mission of the lending program as well as our co-sponsored workshop, they were added by IT Services to all of their iPads available for checkout.

Next we considered classroom technology needs. Due to the drop-in nature of the program, we departed from our normal configuration for information literacy workshops. Instead of one projector and staff member, we employed dual projectors, with one librarian using a laptop and large screen to demonstrate news tools, and a second librarian using an iPad (projected on a nearby wall) to demonstrate news apps. Two additional iPads were available for students to use and experiment with during the presentation. This setup allowed us to demonstrate databases and apps side-by-side and quickly address any questions posed by drop-in attendees.

EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM

“Tech Treats: News Sources” was widely advertised and promoted on campus using posters, online calendar entries, and e-mails. As this was a completely new program and workshop series, we were unsure of what level of attendance to

expect. A few students came in slowly over the two-hour program. We immediately realized that the drop-in format presented several challenges. Rather than “mix and mingle,” ask questions, and experiment with equipment, the attendees expected a more structured presentation. For each person who came in the room, we found it necessary to present the workshop content and then repeat it again when a new person came through the door. Students were also uninterested in trying out the iPads, as most were familiar with them. While attendees liked learning about the featured apps, they did not necessarily want a hands-on tryout as part of their experience.

While this news-related “Tech Treat” was sparsely attended, our attendees were very positive in their feedback. Most expressed surprise at the breadth of Library news resources, with several people particularly impressed by the international news content available to them. A few attendees noted that the information would be helpful in their post-graduate job search: they wished they had known about the resources earlier in order to research potential employers, industries, and current events in preparation for job interviews. This feedback helped us design the second iteration of the workshop.

“News Apps and Databases,” the second version of the news program, incorporated a new name and a more traditional workshop format with a structured presentation. In addition to addressing (we hoped) student expectations for more formal instruction, the structure also made presenting content easier for the librarians. Once again, attendance was low, but feedback remained very positive. Attendees expressed similar comments as in the first program – impressed by what was available, surprised by the Library’s offerings, and articulating a need for career-related news.

The next time we offered the program, we attempted to directly highlight a key benefit of using Library news sources with the title, “Read News for Free: News Databases and Apps.” However, we continued to experience low attendance at the workshop. Why weren’t people attending the sessions? To understand how we could draw more people to our news program, we went back to the comments from past attendees and looked for repeated themes:

- Attendees were surprised by the type and variety of news resources available, and did not think of the Library as the place that provided access to these sources.
- While a few used news apps, most attendees were unaware of the tools we demonstrated.
- Nearly all of the attendees were interested in the program for their careers or job search.

We realized that perhaps we were framing and marketing the program the wrong way. Instead of partnering with our IT Services group, or promoting the news program as a Library workshop, attendee feedback suggested that promoting the workshops through campus career services might reach students looking for news.

MOVING AHEAD

In the late fall, two librarians met with our campus career services staff to promote the news workshop, as well as other library programs that might be relevant to students’ career searches. Immediately, we connected with staff responsible for the “Careers in Journalism” program, who enthusiastically offered to co-sponsor a session specifically for this group during spring quarter.

Despite several marketing efforts targeted specifically at “Careers in Journalism” students, registration for the session failed to reach our minimal threshold and the session was canceled. While we were surprised by this outcome, we were reminded by career services staff that spring programs often experience low attendance, since students are busy completing year-long projects and pursuing summer opportunities. We plan to offer the workshop again in the autumn to students interested in journalism careers. We also intend to offer another version of the news workshop to the career services “Careers in Business” student group, to highlight news resources for students seeking business-related internships and jobs. We hope to obtain additional feedback from these students on the usefulness of the workshop in terms of their schoolwork and career planning.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

What have we learned from our experiences to date? The most heartening lesson has been that attendees find the news workshop valuable, confirming our initial observations that students lack news literacy skills. Attendees have also mentioned friends or classmates that would have enjoyed attending the news workshop, implying there might be a larger need for news literacy instruction.

Marketing the news workshop and finding times that work well for both students and librarians remain our principal challenges. We continue to explore ways to reach students at “point of need” and to convince them to make time for a workshop in their (typically) packed schedules. We are also looking for new ways to integrate news literacy into our course-integrated instruction, especially for majors or departments that may use news resources. We’ve redesigned and updated our Newspaper LibGuide (<http://lib.uchicago.edu/newspapers>) to allow for incorporation into the different course-specific guides we design for classes.

Students’ appreciation for more formal instruction was an unexpected finding. We were surprised to learn that workshop attendees seemed to prefer a structured presentation to an informal drop-in session, perhaps because participants’ lack of awareness of news resources and app features make it difficult to ask specific questions and pursue self-directed learning. We also noted that students appreciated learning about resources and apps, but were less interested in enjoying a “technology petting zoo.”

While we have encountered challenges, the experience of developing our program has also provided us with many opportunities. We have been able to experiment with new tools and technologies, using iPad and apps for the first time in our teaching. We have a better understanding of the challenges we face in promoting our resources, especially those that our users do not associate with libraries. Above all, the experience has allowed our library to think more broadly about our role in helping students navigate new media and technology for both academic and personal use. As the media landscape continues to change, the Library will likely encounter more opportunities to help students achieve academic success and prepare for lifelong learning.

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