

# FROM A “CRUSADE AGAINST IGNORANCE” TO A “CRISIS OF AUTHENTICITY”: CULTIVATING INFORMATION LITERACY FOR A 21ST CENTURY DEMOCRACY

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a social justice imperative to information literacy instruction. Librarians are responsible to help students become sustainable learners—citizens who cultivate networks of information that compel them to pursue fairness, equality, and human rights. I believe that social media platforms, specifically those that encourage curating existing Internet content, can facilitate an information literacy ethic that fosters engaged citizenship and social justice. Social media platforms disrupt knowledge hierarchies and thus are ideal tools with which to practice activist-oriented critical thinking and information management. In this paper, I argue that information literacy instruction which directs students to curate content on social media platforms is an essential component of a democracy-centered education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather than treating information-seeking as a task-oriented process—a vestige of an academy that serves unjust industrial economies—librarians should instead stress curation, a skill that invites students to treat information discovery and organization as an ongoing, perpetually-evolving process that will guide them in their professional and public lives.

## DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND THE PUBLIC VALUE OF INFORMATION LITERACY

Information literacy is grounded in theories of justice and democracy. Indeed, the most relevant definitions have in mind the fundamental expectation of a citizen: that he or

she knows what is happening, senses what is important, and understands what issues rightly or wrongly occupy public attention. Information literacy as idealized today emerges from the Greco-Roman concept of the capable citizen who pursues an education to prepare for public life in society. Shapiro & Hughes (1996) argue that information literacy should be understood as “a new liberal art ... as essential to the mental framework of the information-age citizen as the trivium of basic liberal arts (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) was to the educated person in medieval society” (“Information Literacy,” par. 1). Like liberal arts inquiry, information literacy inflects every aspect of a person’s living and learning experience.

In addition to being influenced by Greco-Roman political philosophy, contemporary attitudes toward information literacy borrow from the Enlightenment-era ideologies espoused by Thomas Jefferson (Bivens-Tatum 2012). Jefferson, a shepherd of the land-grant university model in America, championed a publically-funded education system that encouraged “the diffusion of knowledge among the people” (“Crusade,” para. 2). In his letter to George Wythe, Jefferson writes that America should wage “a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people” so that the young democracy would “know that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance” (para. 2). The Jeffersonian program hinged on a learned citizenry passionate about shaping society for the betterment of all people. Jefferson may not have used the term “information literacy,” but it is clear that his conception of an educated American resembles the kind of citizen-scholar librarians hope to shape through modern information literacy instruction.

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Jefferson's ideal of a democracy sustained by informed citizens has been re-inaugurated in 21<sup>st</sup> century context. On October 1, 2009, Barack Obama recognized the United States' first National Information Literacy Awareness month by pointing to a "crisis of authenticity" that has emerged "in a world where anyone can publish an opinion or perspective, whether true or not, and have that opinion amplified within the information marketplace" ("National," para. 2). Obama's recognition of National Information Literacy Awareness can be interpreted as the central challenge before digital age citizens: the fact that our lives are flooded with information produced and circulated with new technologies. However, time is limited, and Obama understands that in the digital age, our ability to decipher the quality of content is just one barrier to becoming information literate. We must figure out how to organize massive amounts of content in ways that will allow us to intervene in public discourses. Obama argues that what we need is "a new type of literacy [that] requires competency with communication technologies, including computers and mobile devices that can help in our day-to-day decisionmaking" (para. 1). The decision to acknowledge a National Information Literacy month is a direct response to the proliferation of social media and the learning opportunities they present, yet it is also an implicit critique of a democracy that has underprepared its citizens to be effective managers of information.

## THE FAILINGS OF EXISTING MEASURES OF LEARNING

The "crisis of authenticity" of which Barack Obama speaks presents a crossroads for information literacy librarians. Librarians must decide what kind of literacy skills are needed to promote a just democracy in the digital age, and they must determine if these literacy skills are actually cultivated through curriculum based on repetition and rote learning. Much existing pedagogy has jettisoned the ideal of education for democracy in favor of education that favors private enterprise. These curricula, which privilege task-oriented learning over provisional, process-oriented inquiry, have failed to prepare citizens to be public members of a state in which people are compelled to pursue an egalitarian society. Instead, students today see education merely as a precursor to a professional career.

Cathy Davidson (2011) recognizes that longstanding task-oriented educational models no longer meet the needs of today's students. She points out that many models of learning we have relied upon "not only bore kids but prepare them for jobs that no longer exist as they once did" (p. 81). Existing measures of knowledge, especially multiple-choice tests, often do not correspond with the complex realities information seekers experience in today's digital landscapes, but instead reinforce mechanical decision making in a context where there is an ostensible "correct choice." Creating tests with illusion of definite knowledge does not coalesce with how most people teaching in humanistic disciplines understand epistemology, nor does this kind of assessment set up students to be engaged citizens in a world where information is exchanged on social media platforms, networks of limitless connections. In the digital age, Davidson says, "kids have to make choices among

seemingly infinite possibilities," and thus she believes that there is a mismatch "between our national standard of testing and the way students are tested every time they sit by themselves in front of a computer screen" (p. 124). The more refined our digital technologies become, the further distanced they are from pedagogies that encourage habits of information gathering that actually engage citizens.

The problem exists in our discipline as well. Information literacy librarians have favored task-oriented approaches to learning in part because information literacy pedagogy itself emerged in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century education. As Kopp & Olson-Kopp (2010) point out, the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards suggest that finding information is a process that involves tasks to be fulfilled mainly to meet the needs of specific situations:

- Determine the extent of information needed
- Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
- Evaluate information and its sources critically
- Incorporate selected information into one's knowledge base
- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surround the use of information and access and use information ethically and legally

Pawley (2003) is another vociferous critic of task-based information literacy pedagogy. She identifies an internal contradiction between the ideology of critical thinking that shapes information literacy and the "techno-managerial" systems of evaluation we use to talk about measuring information literacy learning outcomes (p. 426). In reality, the process of finding information in the digital age is much more fluid than the process the ACRL standards describe. When students see the completion of an assignment as the chief goal of seeking information, they lose the ability to see themselves as participants in public discourse, and they fail to imagine that they can grow their information sources in ways that will serve them beyond the particular task that occupies them at the moment.

## PRAXIS: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENCOURAGE PUBLICALLY IMPORTANT WRITING

Because the barrier to information literacy is created by a surplus of content, much of it of spurious quality, we must depart from task-driven models of learning and instruction and treat the process of inquiry as one that depends on the networks of information we build. To redress the failings of information literacy instruction that perpetuate rote learning, I suggest that teachers incorporate social media and curation tools into traditional learning exercises. Dabrinski, Kumbier,

& Accardi (2010) suggest that the turn toward nontraditional media in information literacy instruction is necessary because it destabilizes students' perceptions of "the library catalogue and scholarly databases as texts for rote, instrumentalist lessons about authority" (p. xii). In keeping with the goals of critical information literacy pedagogy, there are several other important reasons why social media should be a part of a student's educational experience:

- Social media places learning into the public sphere, thereby encouraging radical engagement in the public process of democracy.
- Social media can facilitate real, important change in the world.
- Social media encourages students to integrate diverse kinds of evidence into their writing.
- Social media presents an alternative to sources of information that may not be financially sustainable, especially proprietary subscription databases.

However, the most significant argument for social media's role in the information literacy classroom is that it encourages curation, a fundamental literacy in the age of social media. Networks that require curation assume that those who use social media are not passive consumers of knowledge, but instead are active organizers of massive amounts of information. Curation, or culling existing Internet content on social media networks and presenting it to other people, liberates information-seeking from task-oriented projects, in which learning transactions have a definite ending. Instead, curation requires that users approach learning as an ongoing process that pays dividends in future situations.

In order to demonstrate how curation can drive engaged learning, I will conclude with an example from my own teaching experience. Recently, I taught a literature course that took as its theme the dereliction of urban America in the wake of our declining industrial economy. During the semester, we read a variety of pastoral poems and novels in the British and American literary traditions that envision cultural decay as the inevitable result of a capital economy dependent on the exploitation of land and labor. I supplemented our primary readings with literary and cultural criticism, essays that modeled ways for students to interpret the literature we read in the context of the contemporary social and ecological problems we face.

I was responsible for the information literacy instruction in this course, and I used that opportunity to teach information-seeking with social media platforms like Twitter. Since I asked the students to approach the literature we read with modern ecological problems in mind, I encouraged them to find information from leading environmentalist outlets and present what they found on topically-focused lists. Students learned how to locate the Twitter feeds of key publications (e.g., *The Climate Desk*, *Orion Magazine*, and *Nature*), prominent public intellectuals who have written about climate change (e.g.,

Michael Pollan, Al Gore, and Bill McKibben), and university initiatives that study nature and culture (e.g., Yale Environment 360). We talked about the concept of information overload on Twitter, and we discussed why the human inability to focus attention demands that we organize our Twitter networks into subcategories. Students used several deductive tactics to add new feeds: they found feeds recommended through Twitter's algorithms, by searching for keywords, or simply by mining the public lists of other public intellectuals who are on Twitter.

Twitter moved our class away from the "one shot" method of instruction that has been scrutinized in recent information literacy scholarship (Kvenild & Calkins, 2011). Periodically, I would ask students to showcase their lists and talk about them. Additionally, the Twitter list assignment served our class discussions and our informal writing assignments. It was not uncommon for students to begin a blog entry or a formal essay with a discussion of a public problem that they first encountered on Twitter. The best example of this process of discovery came at the end of the semester, after we had concluded the course by reading Rebecca Solnit's essay, "Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the post-American landscape." In that essay, Solnit describes the decline of Detroit, a city that lost over half of its population during the last half of the twentieth century. Today, large swaths of abandoned lots and dilapidated houses cover the neighborhoods surrounding downtown Detroit, yet Solnit imagines the city as one with the potential to be transformed into a post-American community. The vacant plots of land are, Solnit argues, "the most extreme and long-term hope Detroit offers us: the hope that we can reclaim what we paved over and poisoned, that nature will not punish us, that it will welcome us home" (p.73). At one point in the article Solnit describes her visit to the Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, a school for teenage mothers that infuses urban farming into its curriculum. The school offers single mothers a chance to complete their high school education, and it encourages students to grow their own vegetables as a supplemental source of income.

Our class had just finished discussing "Detroit Arcadia" when a student named Lauren posted on the course blog (Tinchey, 2011). Lauren had been alerted by a tweet from *Grist Magazine* that the school would be shut down because of a lack of funding from the Michigan state government, and she decided to craft a brief blog post about the news (Zimmerman, 2011). Lauren begins by writing, "I know that class is basically over, but after doing some final research for my paper, I happened to stumble upon this article on *Grist*" (Tinchey, 2011, par. 1). Lauren aptly points out that "a school with a 90% graduation rate and a 50% college acceptance rate for its *pregnant* students sounds like a good thing to me" (par. 2, emphasis original). Her argument is occasioned by the need to weigh in on a social injustice that had been brought to her attention due to earlier curation work with Twitter.

I see the connection that Lauren made between her Twitter list and her ability to write as an engaged public intellectual as the best possible result of a library instruction pedagogy that begins with curation and ends with active interest

in addressing social injustice. Lauren cultivated a network of information that allowed her to encounter relevant, timely sources, related to the themes of our course but still independent from any immediate assignment. The information-seeking skills we learned in class transferred into a moment of public presentation that was not tied to a class grade or assignment, but instead seemed motivated by a genuine concern over a social wrong. The kind of learning and writing that emerges from information discovery on social networks is the foundation of participatory democracies. It invites learners to draw boundaries around spheres of knowledge and present content to others in meaningful ways.

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## APPENDIX A: CURATE A TWITTER LIST ASSIGNMENT

*The following assignment is an example of what I have done in writing and information literacy instruction, as described in the presentation. Feel free to adapt for your own purposes.*

**Context:** One of the fundamental literacies of the digital age is curation. Every day, we encounter hundreds of text messages, tweets, status updates, articles, and images. To counteract what some call information overload, and to weave a massive influx of information into a coherent narrative, many people have started to curate the content they see online. Curation is a form of expression that is personal and critical. It requires the same skills of organizing information and interpreting critically that we expect writers to exhibit. Yet curation is also a public service, a process that ultimately demonstrates to people how we think and make judgments about information.

**Directions:** Create and curate a Twitter list throughout the semester. This list must be public, so it can be shared and followed by other people. The purpose of this assignment is to help you learn about using social media networks to organize and evaluate information. Throughout the semester, the Twitter list will demonstrate your ability to think about the quality, reliability, and relevance of information. With the list you can also convey your ability to locate conversations happening in the professional and public sphere and organize them effectively. Some specific criteria are as follows:

- Create a free Twitter account and develop a public list.
- The list must have at least 40 different feeds from a variety of sources and perspectives. You are encouraged to include more.
- The list must have an articulated purpose and a clear organizing principle related to a social problem, community, or some combination of the two.
- Lists must be maintained throughout the semester.
- You must be prepared to speak about the process of developing your list in class at any time.
- You must share the list with the entire class.

In addition to creating a Twitter list, you are required to reflect on the process of composing and maintaining it. *Write a brief essay* in which you take at least five individual Twitter feeds and answer the following questions about each feed:

- Who owns the feed? From what context does the feed emerge?
- What is the intended audience of the feed?
- How did you find the feed?
- Why did you decide to add the feed to your list? If you left off a feed, why did you decide to exclude or remove it from your list?
- What is the most valuable feed on your list?