

Oregon Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee

Tuesday Topic, February 2017



Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's [Intellectual Freedom Committee](#). Questions can be directed to the IF Committee member who sent the message or to one of the [co-chairs](#) of the IFC.

Vetting Information Sources for Credibility

The American Library Association adopted the [Resolution on Access to Accurate Information](#) on January 24, 2017, in response to a growth in the use of disinformation and media manipulation. The resolution “urges librarians and library workers to actively seek and provide sources of accurate information,” and supports the critical role of instructing information literacy as a direct link to intellectual freedom and basic human rights. Vetting information sources is a fundamental literacy skill that is critical and needs our immediate attention.

Regardless of the size or scope of the user community all libraries are committed to assisting users in locating and verifying credible information sources. This Tuesday Topic was written with the purpose of encouraging librarians and other library professionals to consider ways that vetting current event information sources and using primary sources can be integrated with programming and instruction that is already offered. Rather than give specific programming guidance, this post is designed to provide resources and tools to tackle these two specific areas that are often overlooked in library programming, as well as encourage deeper participation in classroom and community events.

Current Event Information Sources

“Yellow journalism” and “fake news” are examples of why all sources cannot be judged equally. The ability to vet sources is a foundational skill that has become even more challenging to instruct in an intellectual environment where print journalism, cable news, and even the federal government cannot be assumed to be an accurate or credible source for information. This environment is a challenge for all intellectual freedom fighters, but also represents an opportunity. Just as “yellow journalism” led to the demand for journalist integrity and standards in the 1920’s, the current “fake news” crisis has focused the spotlight on source credibility. An

environment where the credibility of journalism is at question, this is a great time to tailor instruction and library programming around the topic of vetting media sources.

A [January 2016 study](#) by Stanford University researchers indicated that most students in the United States cannot tell the difference between a persuasive opinion piece, a corporate advertisement, and a reported news article. This is a startling truth when many individuals keep updated on current events through social media and other less credible information sources. Instructing patrons on how to verify the credibility of information sources for current events is one way that you can bring source credibility into your programming and instruction for any patron demographic. In a [Ted-Ed Blog](#) discussing the Stanford study, the author Laura McClure suggested that five questions be asked of any news item:

1. Who wrote it? Locate the byline and see if it is sponsored content, an industry expert, or a journalist with the intent to inform.
2. What claims does it make? Check the sources and dig deeper to see if cited sources come from credible publications. A good information source will have several citations to other legitimate publications.
3. When was it published? Be careful about breaking news: don't trust anonymous sources and don't trust reports that only cite another news outlet as the information source.
4. Where was it published? If it is not from a source that fact checks, you need to fact check before sharing.
5. How does it make you feel? If the article makes you feel a strong emotion, look at the word choice: do you see persuasive or factual statements?

Academic institutions and K-12 schools may have professors or teachers that are focusing on these exact skills in journalism or social studies and that can be supported with this type of instruction. During reference interactions at any kind of library, providing these questions can guide patrons towards quality information sources. Current events often have limited peer-reviewed resources, requiring more critical thinking to vet a source's credibility.

Integrating Primary Sources

The most effective method for vetting information and uncovering additional information is following the source. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarly journals, are interpretations and analysis written at a later date. Adding primary source research can enhance critical thinking, build information literacy skills, and connect library users in a more tangible way to the research. Locating a historical document can be thrilling and create a deeper connection to a subject.

Integrating archival research into your library's tool kit is a great way to support

existing projects with professors and teachers. Public libraries and academic libraries can connect with the local historical society or museum to create programming that brings history alive. Including primary sources of information (including historical and legal documents, eyewitness accounts, statistical data, audio and video recordings, speeches, and art objects) is easier than ever before with the availability of digital repositories.

There are a variety of ways that you can connect existing programming and instruction with primary sources and build information literacy skills. Connecting with local events and historical people and locations are great places to start. Here are a few questions to consider:

- Do you know what archives hold the papers of people who are integral to your community or institution's history?
- Does your library's website offer links to primary source databases?
- Are there annual events and/or projects that are historically focused that would be improved by having primary sources included?
- Do you know your local historical society or history groups?

Resources

There are so many great resources for integrating primary sources. For example:

- The [National Archives](#) has a plethora of education resources available.
- The [Getty](#) has an amazing photo archives.
- The [Internet Archive](#) has archives of over 279 billion websites.
- The State of Oregon [Archives](#) has locally focused programming.
- PBS/Oregon Public Broadcasting offers [POV films](#), among other great resources, for free to public libraries for viewing.

These are only a few of the amazing online resources and repositories. Finding collections that have resources which interest the community and intersect with existing programming and instruction is the key to creating traction with any push to integrate primary sources into library instruction and programming.

We would love to hear what you are already doing that has worked well, and any ideas that this post may have inspired!

[Alanna Colwell](#), MLIS, M.A.S.

*Member, Oregon Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee
Archivist & Records Supervisor, Washington County, Oregon*