



News Know-how: How Libraries and News Literacy Promote Public Discourse and Intellectual Freedom

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On March 30, 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* and other prestigious U.S. newspapers ran a photo on the front page, above the fold—the kind of photo that wins the Pulitzer Prize. A British soldier in Basra was warning seated Iraqi civilians to take cover. Meanwhile, an imploring father was approaching the soldier with a baby in his arms. The overall “message” of the photo was of concerned occupation forces protecting Iraqicivilians.

The problem was, the photo was a composite. Award-winning combat photographer Brian Walski combined three photos to create a more compelling story: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/photo/essays/vanRiper/030409.htm>.

On April 1, 2003, Brian Walski was fired despite his unblemished record and the recognition of his colleagues that he was probably suffering from war stress. One of his colleagues commented: “When I saw him, I really did not recognize him. He was sunburned, had not eaten in days, nor slept in 35 hours, his clothes were filthy, his beard—all over the place. And he smelled like a goat.”
<http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/9289/l-a-times-photographer-fired-over-altered-image/>

But Walski’s violation of journalistic ethics trumped everything. The *L.A. Times* issued a correction and an editorial to its readers: “The message to readers and to its paper’s staff couldn’t be more clear: Tampering with reality isn’t a mistake. It’s a violation of everything journalism stands for.”
<http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/07/opinion/oe-russ7>

Who is Concerned About the State of the News

In recent years there are dozens of similar examples of the media playing fast and loose with reality in the news—enough to concern the Open Society Institute’s founder, George Soros to fund projects to confront this problem, which OSF views as a threat to democracy and civil society formation. This Hungarian-American’s experiences with Fascism and then Communism led him to write about propaganda and the manipulation of language in general.

Soros was influenced by George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” (1946) which cites specific examples of how language is used to manipulate public opinion and to discourage critical thinking:

http://www.george-orwell.org/Politics_and_the_English_Language/0.html. Orwell’s comments on political speech are as fresh today as in 1946:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a “party line.” Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style . . . When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—BESTIAL ATROCITIES, IRON HEEL, BLOOD STAINED TYRANNY, FREE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD, STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy.

One recent book blames this substandard media discourse on *Sound-Bite Saboteurs: Public Discourse, Education, and the State of Democratic Deliberation* (by Julie Drew, William Lyons, and Lance Svehla, SUNY, 2010). News organizations—whether TV, radio, newspapers, or social media—tend to simplify situations into short statements. In the U.S., one of these is “Obamacare,” which began as a pejorative description of the current health care legislation, but has now been adopted by all the media, pro and con. Such simplifications stifle critical thinking and promote “black and white” situations. When this author was recently asked to discuss “porn in libraries” on national television, she was told to “keep it simple”—meaning 10 seconds. This leads to misinformation about a very complicated legal and social problem over young people’s use of the Internet in libraries. And it leads to being misquoted by ALA’s detractors.

What is one unfortunately result of sound bites? A decontextualization of the news. Simplification of current events is a dangerous slippery slope, especially today, when we are all too busy to stop to understand an issue. Many of us were taught not to question authority, and we view the news as the “truth.” It is far easier to view an issue as “black and white.” In short, we have become lazy. And this bodes poorly for democracy. Decontextualization also leads to censors who object to a book for a few “bad words”, instead of considering the impact of the book as a whole.

This author’s own inspiration for projects of this type comes from Alexander Meiklejohn, a legal and educational philosopher who lived and worked from 1872-1964. He was President of Amherst College and then went on to set up an experimental college at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He is a

fascinating scholar, worthy of much research, but here the focus will be on his ideas of democracy, the First Amendment, and civic engagement.

Meiklejohn believed that in order for democracy to work, an informed electorate is necessary. Otherwise—and this is what is intriguing—he believed that those in power can manipulate public opinion. He believed the following, as stated in his 1948 *Free Speech and Its Relation to Self-Government*:

- Education should prepare us for the world in which we live as workers, citizens, and persons in interpersonal relationships.
- Spirited discourse is a valuable learning approach.
- Dialogue brings us to a larger level of truth.
- The town or village meeting is an ideal mode for exercising free speech.

This author cannot help but wonder what Meiklejohn would say if he could look at the inequitable U.S. education system today, the lack of critical analysis in the public discourse, and how much the media resorts to sound bites. Does his ideal “informed electorate” exist, and is it up to the task of resisting the Orwellian media manipulation?

ALA's Civic Engagement Initiatives

Some years ago American Library Association became officially engaged in the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums--discussion groups, unbiased and nonpartisan, conducted on the community level, to discuss such issues as: health care, the economic recession, racism, and the education system. For more information, see: <http://nifi.org/>. Another distinguished organization is the Harwood Institute: <http://theharwoodinstitute.org>. Past ALA President Nancy Kranich and incoming president Maureen Sullivan remain particularly passionate about civic engagement (which has its origins in the Scandinavian “study circles.”) In her trips around the country Kranich found that ordinary people feel very alienated from public affairs and powerless to do much about them. They feel that big-money interests have totally dominated U.S. political discourse and decisions.

ALA is promoting the use of libraries, as trusted community centers, to host these community forums to discuss these issues. Librarians are being trained in the methodology to make sure that all voices are heard and all sides of an issues explored.

News Know-how Grant

And so when the Open Society Foundations offered ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom a grant to address the problem of news literacy, we jumped at the chance! Many ask: how is news literacy related to intellectual freedom? My response is threefold:

- *A free press* is an essential underpinning to intellectual freedom. But a free press doesn't last unless people demand it and interact with it. One alert journalist caught the doctored Iraq photo and was courageous enough to publicize it. Newspaper blogs in many parts of the world include vigorous public attacks on their leaders' hypocrisy or corruption. This public demand

for journalistic excellence on all levels is crucial for a healthy civil society. And the public must be allowed to post these blogs without fear of arrest. And so the free press is interdependent on the free speech rights of its citizenry.

- *Libraries* exist as models for the protection of free press and free speech. Libraries exist under the ideal of information without barriers. We would have limited or no access to books, journals, or Internet access without open access to information. IFLA/FAIFE and other intellectual freedom organizations exist to support this ideal as stated in *Article 9* of the *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and in many national constitutions and Freedom of Information legislation.
- The growing commitment in librarianship to *information literacy* is a demonstration of the importance of libraries teaching their users how to use information wisely. If a library user asks to see how “corrupt” her country is, the librarian should be able to guide that user to the web site of Transparency International and the “Corruption Perceptions Index.” But the librarian should not stop there. Who is TI anyway? Where do they get their information? Who funds them? What makes TI such a great source is that their web site answers all of these questions and more! You will find such topics as: “Who We Are,” and “Our Accountability,” and “Research.” A librarian’s job is not only to show the answer to a user. If a librarian follows the principles of information literacy, he/she will explain all of the above to the user. That user’s own government statistics might show her country is #100 in terms of corruption, while TI shows it to be #10. Users should understand what is driving those different statistics. Libraries are the place for sorting this out. To quote from the new *IFLA Media and Information Literacy Recommendations*:

Media and Information Literacy consists of the knowledge, the attitudes, and the sum of the skills needed to know when and what information is needed; where and how to obtain that information; how to evaluate it critically and organize it once it is found; and how to use it in an ethical way. <http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/ifla-media-and-information-literacy-recommendations>

To bring all the components together: freedom of speech depends on a free press and also on libraries to provide not only the content from the press but also the information for the public to question and interact with that press to keep it honest. That requires that librarians provide, and users learn, information literacy as part of their lifelong learning tool kit. Without all three, intellectual freedom and critical thinking will die and so will civil society.

Journalists and Librarians: Common Ground

Increasingly in the United States, librarians and journalists are asking each other what they have in common. How can their collaboration make libraries and the media better for a civil society? On April 6-7, 2011, 125 librarians and journalists talked about this at “Beyond Books,” at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Center for Future Civic Media. Librarians and journalists both have codes of ethics that support intellectual freedom. Both professions are undergoing profound transformations essential to their survival. Both depend on, disseminate, and create information for a living. In the United States both share the value of transparency and freedom of speech as enshrined in the First Amendment. And librarians and journalists alike are providing information in multiple formats—from paper to Twitter. Newsrooms and libraries produce information essential to the healthy functioning of democracy. It has become harder to verify “facts,” and to provide “objectivity”—if there ever was such a thing. And the lines defining who is a “professional” reporter or librarian is also blurring.

David Weinberger, famous co-author of *Cluetrain Manifesto*, showed that twenty-first century knowledge is obtained not in linear fashion but in a more random process involving a variety of sources building on each other (i.e., the web). As a result, libraries and journalists are gathering information in ways that demand new skills and organization of services. And so, some public libraries now house newsrooms or public access television; a Brooklyn, NY project puts cameras into the hands of young people to create news in underserved communities; and libraries are hosting community discussions about “what is wrong with the media and how can we fix it.” One journalism professor at the conference teaches working-class students, who have always felt alienated from the mainstream media, to make news of their own. The Skokie, IL Public Library has launched skokienet.org for this purpose. One group is creating a portable library for a farmers’ market. This library could be a space where diverse community members mingle, highlight information on healthy food choices, and the like. Journalists would cover the community engagement arising from discussion in this space. A similar collaboration occurred naturally at the various “Occupy Wall Street” sites, where libraries were established and became centers for community discourse and news gathering.

The Beyond Books conference created a “consensus statement” to mark the beginning of an important collaboration between the two professions:

<http://www.mediagiraffe.org/wiki/index/php/Biblionews-work-statement>

Full information about the conference, including videos, summaries of the breakout groups, plus opportunities to engage with participants can be found at:

<http://journalismthatmatters.org/biblionews/>

ALA’s News Know-how Grant

And so, in February 2012 the American Library Association and the Open Society Foundations unveiled their *News Know-how* Project.

Librarians, journalists, ethicists and high school students will create programs and content based on critical analysis of the news. The two-year grant will begin with four libraries and systems: Oak Park Public Library in Illinois; the State Library of Iowa, with 10 Iowa libraries, both rural and urban; the Chicago Public Library; and the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. The project has the following components:

- A news literacy curriculum and training by the News Literacy Project of Bethesda, Maryland: <http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/>. This curriculum will teach high school students to understand the “news neighborhood” in which they live, and how to read the news critically, whether it is a Facebook post or *The New York Times*.
- An information literacy preparatory curriculum for participating librarians, to be conducted before the programs begin in the libraries. This is being written and conducted via webinars by the Iowa State Library information literacy specialists. Students will learn to “check the facts” of news sources, with librarians to help them.
- Use of media technology and software so that the students can create their own articles, reports and editorials, and understand the difference between fact and opinion. Each participating student will complete a final project.
- A web site for students to share their work.
- A possible international component. We are currently exploring this, and have visited Beirut as part of that exploration. The author will be demonstrating the project at IFLA in Helsinki and in Kenya for a U.S. Embassy program in September , 2012.
- Possible follow up public discussions in the libraries, with adults and kids, to discuss what is wrong with the U.S. media and how to fix it, led by the students who have taken the course.
- A rigorous and honest assessment of the successes and failures of the project, conducted by faculty and students of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

Our goal is to create a variety of models, with costs, for libraries in rural, urban, or regions, to replicate this project. We want libraries to be viewed by their communities as places where they can CHECK THE FACTS. We want libraries to serve as models of fairness, neutrality, and accuracy in presenting data and other information to the public—and teaching them how to figure that out for themselves.

This project is one of many “youth media” projects in the United States, but the first we know of that uses libraries as newsrooms. We welcome inquiries and research suggestions. This is new territory for many, and we urge librarians, journalists, and LIS students and faculty to engage in this discourse.

