

New Technologies, Citizen Empowerment, and Civic Life

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Abstract: Information literacy and civic literacy intersect in ways that are important to society and that demonstrate the value of librarians and publishers. Librarians and publishers play an important role in cultivating information literacy in the populace so that citizens can carry out their civic responsibilities in an informed and responsible way. The spread of the Internet and the challenges it poses to traditional information providers creates new challenges for publishers and librarians.

Keywords: new media, information literacy, civic literacy, publishers, librarians, mass media

Introduction

Gutenberg's introduction of movable type made the printed book era possible in the fifteenth century. Once printing and paper production became industrial processes, mass media developed. Multiple copies of books produced at acceptable prices allowed increased, albeit far from universal, ownership of books. Newspapers and magazines also emerged as economically viable means to record and distribute information. Mass media yielded varied social dividends. Where ecclesiastical or government censorship did not interfere, the mass media allowed expression and dissemination of varied points of view. This enriched and enlivened civic discourse. One can legitimately question whether or not the American revolution in 1776 would have occurred had it not been for newspapers and pamphlets that spread new ideas and ideals and united the colonies in opposition to England.

Information technologies have improved continuously and new information technologies have emerged. The rate of increase of new knowledge and discovery accelerated century after century. Except for the most politicized and sensational newspapers and journals, mass media also became de facto authorities and trusted sources of knowledge and information. The exception, of course, has been in societies with state controlled media that functions as a propaganda tool as much and perhaps more than its functions as an information source. In such cases disbelief is many citizens' response to the state controlled media's messages.

With the development of mass media, information became more abundant and more accessible. However producers and distributors of information and the consumers of information played distinctly different roles. Publishing a newspaper, a magazine, or books or launching and maintaining a television or radio station all require significant start-up capital. This has limited the number of actors in these mass media industries. For this reason, that limited number of publishers and broadcasters have enjoyed significant social influence. They have also acted as gatekeepers, choosing which creative works to publish, broadcast, and disseminate and which works to ignore. There have always been exceptions, e.g., vanity publishers catering to authors whose books cannot find a publisher. Underground publication, another exception, have played an important role in repressive societies, e.g., the samizdat publishing system in the Soviet Union. However the social influence of alternative media enterprises has rarely been a match for the dominant media.

The most successful media enterprises have been able to shape public opinion and at times have even created something approximating social consensus. This has not always been for the good—e.g., the McCarthy era in mid-twentieth century in the United States had a chilling effect on free expression. Because these enterprises have, however, seen themselves as having a responsibility to society, they have generally valued fidelity to fact and reality. Many of them have become trusted sources of information. There have, of course, been and continue to be mass media organizations that play fast and loose with fidelity to fact. Overall, however, for much of the twentieth century in American society and other developed countries the mass media has enjoyed significant social influence. In part this has been due to the relative scarcity of the means of producing and dissemination information and the concentration of this power in those established media organizations.

New Technologies and Changing Roles

That has changed dramatically over the past 15 years with the astronomical growth of the Internet. Reasonably priced personal computers and access to powerful networks has changed the costly scarcity of media production into an affordable abundance. Free software allows individuals to set up a blog and become publishers. It has empowered the individual citizen and called into question the mass media's authority. In the era of the print-only newspaper, an individual could write a letter to the editor. The editor would decide whether or not to publish that letter, either in full or part. If published, the letter would reach a portion of the newspaper's readers.

Compare that narrow dissemination to today's opportunities. Now blogs and other even more dynamic, interactive social software allow individuals who once would have reached only a limited audience to reach a much larger and more geographically dispersed audience. This has undermined the authority of the mass media.

American comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert ironically used the mass medium of television to illustrate how authority has eroded. He did it with a concept he called "truthiness." The American Dialect Society named "truthiness" its word of the year for 2005. Truthiness, the ADS explained, "refers to the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true." As Mr. Colbert said, "I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart." (Truthiness Voted 2005 Word of the Year 2006) Yet how quickly this word has dropped from use!

Perhaps truthiness has lost favor because it requires effort. To establish the truthiness of the so-called "fact" that the population of African elephants had tripled, Steven Colbert had to ask the viewers of his *Colbert Report* television show to modify Wikipedia's article on elephants. People recognized this as satire and placed no stock in the false statement about elephants' sudden population boom. Nonetheless they rushed to edit the Wikipedia article to misstate the status of the African elephant population. Truthiness requires action. It also requires consensus, something that can come about without the overt effort necessary to establish the "truthiness" of a so-called fact.

Take, for example the ease with which millions of Americans during the U.S. 2008 presidential campaign accepted the falsehood that Barak Obama is a Muslim. This claim often cited his middle name—Hussein--as proof, even though there is no if-then connection between one's name and one's religious affiliation. Take as another example from that campaign the ease with which many, including some librarians, accepted at face value the bogus claim that as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska Sarah Palin tried to remove a long list of books from Wasilla's public library—even though some books on the list hadn't yet been published at the time. Has rumor displaced truthiness?

Or perhaps opinion, undisturbed by fact, has replaced both truth and truthiness. On October 2, 2008 CNN in the United States announced results of a viewer poll: 85% of the respondents said that cyclist Lance Armstrong has never been involved in doping. This poll result was presented on the air as if the numbers reported the truth the same way the final vote total in an election identifies the winner. The point of the story was that the French anti-doping agency AFLD wanted to retest Armstrong's 1999 Tour de France urine samples. Apparently AFLD places more faith in science than in quick polls of CNN viewers. Perhaps majority opinion has come to supplant accurate, trustworthy information.

In the pre-Internet era, because economic factors limited the number of media outlets, people who wanted information were at least exposed to ideas that might run contrary to their own. As they paged through a newspaper they might read an op-ed article or an editorial that took a stand different from their own. This clash of ideas would stir debate, or at least encourage a reader to consider a conflicting point of view. Where once the mass media had the opportunity to generate debate and foster social consensus, today individuals can use information media to insulate themselves from ideas and influences they do not agree with.

Right-wing talk radio in the United States, personified by Rush Limbaugh, illustrates the way that an individual can isolate himself or herself from debate and conflicting views. Guests are invited on the show because their opinions agree with the host's opinions. Callers call in to express their agreement and to attack those they disagree with. This tautological process creates a fortress mentality in which truth can easily be sacrificed for unanimity of opinion and for affirmation of a group's shared beliefs and values. Surrounded only by like thinkers, no new ideas penetrate the fortress and only old ideas abide within it. Ideology doesn't matter; left-wing talk radio has the same invidious narrowing effect.

The Web and social networking software can intensify this intellectual isolation. One can join only those Facebook and Yahoo groups, subscribe only to those online discussion groups, and read only those blogs that affirm and never challenge one's own opinions. Such narrowing and hardening of opinion, outlook, and attitude intensifies political conflicts. They lead to accepting as a political scorecard of wins and losses for one's faction as the measure of society's health, a measure that in its narrowness is in itself actually a measure of dysfunction in civic discourse. Compromise and collaboration become very unlikely, perhaps impossible. And in the quest for reinforcement of personal acknowledgement and affirmation, acceptance of truth and fact loses importance.

In *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* Rob Gifford describes how in Shanghai

One shiny new office tower...has become a huge TV screen, with advertisements and government propaganda alternately lighting up the entire side of the building, one message replaced five seconds later by another.

Welcome to Shanghai. Tomorrow will be even more beautiful.

1,746 more days until the Shanghai World Expo.

Sexual equality is a basic policy of our country.

Eat Dove chocolate. (Gifford 2007)

Even discounting a sweet tooth, the citizens of Shanghai undoubtedly place greater stock in ads for chocolate than in the ruling party's nostrums. They have learned through experience how to judge the source of a bit of information, just as viewers of the *Colbert Report* know how to evaluate satire.

Libraries play many important roles in our communities. We help the members of those communities—elementary and secondary students, citizens, college students, etc.—learn to recognize the need to find and evaluate information and how to do so. School and academic librarians work with faculty to teach these

concepts and competencies to students. Public librarians strive to do the same, albeit for much more diffuse communities. These opportunities open to librarians when people recognize that they need information, for example, when they want to test the truth of a claim about a candidate for public office or when they want to know what options are open to them after they receive a foreclosure notice that may force them from their home.

Information Literacy and Civic Literacy

Information literacy intersects with civic literacy. A Web search on “civic literacy” turns up myriad definitions. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills defines it in part as “Participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes.” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2004) In preparation for last fall’s national election in the United States, public and academic libraries posted information on special election Web pages, created book displays, and hosted public forums about the issues. Elections come and go; but issues abide, as do our roles to promote information literacy and civic literacy.

Librarians and publishers have a vital role to play in increasing civic literacy. Because of our profound commitment to intellectual freedom we vigorously defend the American classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, J.K. Rowling’s tales of a young wizard in training, and a children’s book about two male penguins who care for an egg. (Richardson and Parnell 2005) We present programs on controversial subjects, inviting proponents and opponents to share their views in a trusted public forum. We make our meeting rooms available without prejudice to groups whose own prejudices we may well find repugnant. The library is the Ellis Island of ideas. We welcome ideas from all and provide a place where they clash, meld, morph, and synthesize to challenge and energize society and its public discourse.

When Stephen Colbert misused Wikipedia to foist upon its users bogus information, he called into question the validity of Wikipedia’s social editing methods and its premise that collaborative social knowledge will correct individual errors. At one extreme we have mass movements that negate this premise—for example, the rise of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party in the 1930s, the sectarian conflicts in Iraq, and the new vigor that white supremacist groups have felt since Barack Obama’s election as president of the United States. Many have questioned Wikipedia’s premises, usually citing the lack of authority among many, perhaps even most, of its self-appointed authors.

On the other hand, there are many testimonials to the success of the Wikipedia editing process. In the September 2006 issue of *The Atlantic*, Marshall Poe, an academic historian who studies and writes about Russia discussed the article about him in Wikipedia. (Poe 2006) One of Wikipedia’s many anonymous editors nominated that article for deletion. Others, none identifiable by name, responded. The discussion ended with a strong assertion by “Tupsharru” who had searched the Library of Congress’s catalog and cited Poe’s strong record as a published Russian historian. “Tupsharru” concluded his argument by writing, “I don’t know why I have to repeat this again and again in these deletion discussions on academics, but don’t just use Amazon when the Library of Congress catalogue is no farther than a couple of mouse clicks away.” (Poe 2006)

Three years ago Poe predicted that Wikipedia’s future was secure, that it had become “the place where all nominal information about objects of widely shared experience will be negotiated, stored, and renegotiated. When you want to find out *what something is*, you will go to Wikipedia, for that is where common knowledge will, by convention, be archived and updated and made freely available.” (Poe 2006) Collaborative social knowledge about “what something is” can be and, as Wikipedia has demonstrated, is very useful to the worldwide readership Wikipedia has attracted. The Library of Congress has asked for help

from the collective knowledge hive to identify what some of the things in its collections are. Describing its “Photos on Flickr” project, the library “invite[s] you to tag and comment on the photos, and we also welcome identifying information—many of these old photos came to us with scanty descriptions!” (Library of Congress 2008) This is another good use of social knowledge, even when only one person can identify the subject or date or place captured in a photograph. By sticking to describing “what something is” and by responding quickly to attacks such the one Stephen Colbert launched on its article on elephants, Wikipedia has established its credibility within that limited scope of conveying what things are. That does not prevent Wikipedians from trying to exceed those limits and explain what things mean—things such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the presidency of George W. Bush, global warming, or euthanasia.

These topics touch on civic life at the international level. History has shown through incidents such as the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990s and the unpunished lynchings of blacks in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the knowledge of the hive can be dangerous and deadly when it claims to explain what things mean.

Roles of Publishers and Librarians

Librarian and publishers have a special role and responsibility in civic life at every level—the village or city, the state, the nation, and the world. Through books, periodicals, and other media that analyze things to explore their meanings, publishers and librarians enrich civic life and promote civic literacy. Citizens can stay informed and educate themselves about the issues of the day and explore varied interpretations of what things that affect their lives and the world mean. Publishers and librarians and Wikipedia share responsibility for helping people know what things are. When it comes to understanding what things mean, our role complements Wikipedia and other collaborative social knowledge projects.

This latter role presents special challenges. Understanding what things mean usually requires an extended explanation and a carefully structured argument that organizes and interprets relevant evidence. The shelves of our college and university libraries brim with books written to explain the meanings of myriad topics. These books require from their readers a commitment of time and attention and a willingness to examine the evidence and the author’s interpretation of that evidence’s meaning.

The scarcest commodity today in every developed society is attention. Each day thousands of stimuli vie for our attention. The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign illustrates the effect of this on civic life. In September the *New York Times* reported on

one of the most frustrating challenges that Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama are facing going into the final weeks of this campaign: the ways in which the proliferation of communications channels, the fracturing of mass media and the relentless political competition to own each news cycle are combining to reorder the way voters follow campaigns and decide how to vote. It has reached a point where senior campaign aides say they are no longer sure what works, as they stumble through what has become a daily campaign fog, struggling to figure out what voters are paying attention to. (Nagourney 2008)

The McCain and Obama campaigns weren’t trying to make carefully structured arguments that organize and interpret relevant evidence. They were simply trying to get attention—preferably positive attention—for their respective candidates.

Getting attention for a message is only the first step. The message needs to be presented in a way that engages attention. And then there is the biggest challenge for publishers and librarians—presenting information about what things mean, not just coherently, but also concisely. The dominant medium for information dissemination and access today is the Web. It seems that attention spans for information

delivered electronically has shrunk to the size of a single Web page, preferably one that requires only a small bit of scrolling.

Conclusions

The challenge publishers and librarians face in carrying out their mission in democracies to assure an informed citizenry has three components:

- First, to attract the attention of readers/viewers/listeners—for the multimedia aspects of the Web allow for all three of these modes simultaneously
- Second, after attracting a reader's/viewer's/listener's attention, engaging it so that the individual doesn't click away to some other information source
- Third, conveying information about complex issues succinctly

Libraries depend to a great extent, but not exclusively on publishers to create information resources that meet these three criteria. The greatest challenge will be the third. Thus far the electronic book has mimed the printed book, generally mirroring its appearance in PDF format. Neither e-books nor printed books make it easy for empowered citizens, an synonym for readers, to respond to let alone interact with an author the way they can by commenting on a blog post. Authors and publishers need to experiment with electronic book forms that are transformative—forms that integrate information in forms other than just linear text and that encourage conversation among the books' users. Ideally these new creations will engage people in vigorous, informed debate about public policy issues and lead to greater civic literacy.

Librarians will continue to play a familiar role with these new creations. First, we must accommodate them in our collections and devise ways to describe them that make them accessible very soon after they are published. New electronic forms of publishing will not wait for old cataloging codes to catch up to them. We must also encourage their use. Most importantly, we must continue to help readers/viewers/listeners appreciate the need to look at all information resources critically and to evaluate them using familiar criteria such as the authority of the creator, the source's factual accuracy, the creator's biases, etc.

Every new information medium poses challenges. In the United States newspapers are struggling with these issues as the immediacy and ubiquity of online access displaces static daily ink-on-paper delivery of information. The plight of newspapers illustrates the necessity for publishers of other current genre to experiment more. Librarians need to embrace new media and help users understand these new media's strengths and limitations. As information technologies and delivery systems continue to change, both publishers and librarians need to find ways to continue to provide resources that explain not just what things are, but what things mean. There is danger in not taking these risks—not just the danger of being considered an irrelevant institution or profession, but the graver danger that society will organize itself in such ways that people are never exposed to a range of competing ideas and will receive only information—factual or erroneous—that consistently reinforces but never challenges their thinking.

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