Emerging Literacy Challenges in a Fake News World

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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As both teacher librarians and classroom teachers, we have always been called upon to ensure students have skills in the areas of information and media literacy. However, the world of media is changing. What are the new and emerging challenges of literacy in a fake news world? What should we, as educators and literacy specialists, teach our students to help them be critical thinkers who question information and do not automatically accept everything they see as truth?

Giants like Google, Facebook and many others are working on programs that will help sift through and detect fraudulent information and fake news. But is that really an answer? While filtering some of that out would be a plus, web tools and the sophistication of the internet are constantly evolving. Just as we cannot rely on an app to police our children and teach them digital citizenship, it is not enough for us to rely on programs to do the critical thinking needed to be information and media literate.

Information literacy has always been about critically examining information and sources - truth versus fiction, fact versus opinion, author bias and discrimination, quality of information…and so on. Now, however, the amount of information students are exposed to that is purposefully false or misleading is greater all the time. We could each discuss an infinite number of examples of fake news. Students need skills in information and media literacies to spot it.

Why is spotting fake news a crucial skill? A Stanford History Education Group study revealed that over 80% of students could not distinguish real from fake news on the web. These same results were found in poorer, under-resourced schools as in wealthier schools with extensive research resources. While those who have grown up with technology may be able to jump between Facebook and Twitter at the same time as they are uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend, when it comes to evaluating information that they view on social media, they are easily fooled.

There are some fact checking sites available online that students (and adults) can use to help them to decide if stories are factual or fake. Some examples, like *Facts Can*, *Canada Fact Check* and *Snopes*, can help us get to the bottom of some things a bit quicker. However, teaching our students to rely entirely on others for their literacy and critical thinking skills seems like we are missing the mark.

Information literacy can help if a headline does not make students stop and question. A quote from the *Global Digital Citizen* states "When we talk about Information Fluency we're talking about applying critical analytical thinking to information. It means developing a mindset that encourages us not to take what we see online at face value."

Daniel J. Levitin, PhD, describes the seven things he says will make you a better critical thinker:

1. Don't believe it just because others do
   o Someone who thinks critically, can make up their own mind after viewing opinions and collecting facts. In this era of fake news and unregulated Web content, this is very important.

2. Don't believe it because it has a fancy website, scientific terms, or equations
   o On the Internet, it is easy to fall into "digital rabbit holes" when we're taken in by information presented in an exciting way we can't ignore. Teach students to be more discriminating about what they consume online.

3. Don't reject a source that's occasionally wrong
   o Everybody makes mistakes, even groups whose job is to report the facts. A source is not necessarily unreliable if they present the occasional item of misinformation. Help students look at the bigger picture.

4. Check for plausibility
   o If the big claims sound to good to be true, they probably are. This is where fact-checking plays an important role.

5. Correlation is not causation
   o Events that seem related can occur or transform together but it doesn't necessarily mean that one caused the other.

6. Check that the evidence supports the conclusion
   o Does the evidence presented actually make the conclusion stronger? If not, it's probably just big talk or padding of information.

7. Look for a "control condition"
   o A control condition is the group in an experiment that is opposite the treatment group. "This is the group that doesn't receive the application of whatever is being tested. In this way, the experiment has a baseline to use in determining if there is any change."

(GDC Team, January 21,2018)

One other area that can cause issues for student literacy is online videos which present a host of new challenges. It used to be that if we saw someone recorded, saying something, we could believe the words were theirs. Yes, the video could have been cut, mashed up and edited to be what someone wanted it to be, but their words were their words. But now? What challenges are emerging with face-capture and re-enactment software? It exists now, and it is only getting

more sophisticated. Complex algorithms loosely mimic the thinking of the human brain. Now anyone with a smartphone can upload their picture and use it for any number of benign or not so benign applications. Video editing takes fake news to a whole new level.

In her article, *The Future of Fake News*, Erin Wilkey Oh suggests some essential questions for critically thinking about videos. When asked "How can we prepare students for a world in which nothing can be trusted?", she says, the truth is, many teachers are already doing it. She suggests that new technologies will require us to refine some of our tried-and-true media literacy techniques, but some core questions remain the same.

Oh says to build your lessons on these essential questions to ground students in solid critical thinking habits:

1. **Who created this message?**
   o This helps students pull back the curtain and recognize that all media is constructed by an author with a particular vision, background, and agenda.
2. **Why is this message being sent? Why was it made?**
   o Have students investigate the purpose of a message. Is it to inform, entertain, or persuade, or is it some combination of these? They should consider the various motives behind sending a message, whether that's gaining power, profit, or influence.
3. **Where is this message being distributed?**
   o Help students consider what the distribution of a message can tell us about the message itself. Where did the video show up? On a social media feed? Who originally posted it? Is it showing up anywhere else? Are reputable news outlets distributing the video?
4. **Which techniques are used to attract my attention?**
   o Whether it's a video, commercial, or app, different forms of digital media use unique conventions to keep us engaged.
5. **Which lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented—or missing?**
   o All messages have embedded values and points of view. And oftentimes certain perspectives and voices are missing—a gap that's important to consider.

(Oh, December 12, 2017)

Finally, the Stanford group recommends the following three strategies for teaching students to be literate, critical thinkers in a fake news world:

1. **Teach students to read laterally**
   o Hop off an unfamiliar site almost immediately, opening new tabs, and investigating outside the site itself. Have students leave a site so they can

learn more about it. This may seem strange, but it allows them to use the strength of the entire Internet to evaluate one part.

2. **Help students make smarter selections from search results**
    o   In an open search, the first site they click matters. Their first impulse might send them clicking onto further links, or it might be the only site they look at. Teach students that the higher up a result lands, does not mean the more reliable the site! Instead of mindlessly clicking on the first or second result, help them learn to be patient, taking their time on search results, scrutinizing URLs and descriptions for clues.

3. **Teach students to use Wikipedia wisely**
    o   You read that right, Wikipedia. The first stop of many fact checkers' is often a site many teachers tell students to stay away from. The Stanford group says we should be teaching students what fact checkers know about Wikipedia and helping them take advantage of the resources of the fifth-most trafficked site on the web. Students should learn about Wikipedia's standards of verifiability and investigate Wikipedia's "Talk" pages which have a lot of great information where students can see knowledge-making in action. They can use Wikipedia as a resource to practice lateral reading.

(McGrew, Ortega, Breakstone & Wineburg, p. 8-9)

What do these suggested lists of strategies have in common? They are all based on helping our students learn both comprehension and critical thinking skills. These have always been important, but the media today is challenging our students more than ever before. They may spend a lot of time exposed to media, but we cannot assume they are examining it with a critical eye. Also, if they are not yet providers of media themselves, they soon will be. They must also learn what a responsible and reliable contributor of media looks like. Are we up to the challenge?

<u>Resources</u>

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