AASCU'S AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PROJECT LAUNCHES INITIATIVE TO

HELP STUDENTS FIGHT FAKE NEWS

By Holly Leber Simmons

It probably takes less than two seconds to retweet an article or share a post on Facebook. But how do you know the information you're passing along to your friends and followers is accurate?

In the era of social media and "fake news," information literacy—the ability to seek and find credible information and use it effectively—is vital.

AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP) launched the national Digital Polarization Initiative (DigiPo) to equip college students with the skills they need for online civic reasoning, to encourage them to make positive interventions in the online information environments they inhabit, and to elevate best practices for teaching digital fluency.

"Nowadays, [students are] going to go straight to Google," said Mark Alan Canada, provost at Indiana University Kokomo (IU Kokomo). "If you're doing research beyond well-known topics, you're not going to find much that's useful."

Indiana University Kokomo is one of 11 campuses piloting the DigiPo initiative, which is being spearheaded by Michael Caulfield, director of Blended and Networked Learning at Washington State University Vancouver (WSU Vancouver). ADP hopes the effort will eliminate the spread and normalization of "fake news," as well as the pervasiveness of online "callout culture," which has lead to what Canada referred to as a "truth crisis."

"The chief thing that has changed is the democratization of the media," Canada said. "Anyone with access to the internet can publish anything without a gatekeeper. Now readers have to be more careful than ever before."

Information literacy can be broken down into a series of steps:

1. Know when you have an information need.
2. Be able to articulate that need to find appropriate information sources, such as relevant databases.
3. Search for the information within those sources.
4. Know how to evaluate that information for validity and timeliness.

From left to right, Paul Cook, Polly Boruff-Jones, Calip Deaton, Yan He and Todd Bradley are implementing the Digital Polarization Initiative at Indiana University Kokomo. Credit: Indiana University Kokomo Office of Media & Marketing

Yan He, information literacy librarian and steering committee member at Indiana University Kokomo, assists a student.

Methods for Vetting Online Information

1 Look for previously trusted work. Before clicking that retweet button or sharing a post, go beyond your social media feeds to look at sites such as Snopes or PolitiFact and check out the range of headlines around the story, or check out the author's previous work.

2 Go to the source. Most propaganda material will not be based in original reporting. Authors with an agenda will resort to levelling—finding a topical article and removing information that does not serve their purpose. With enough incarnations, information gets distorted—think of the childhood game "Telephone." Look at the original source material to get the full scope of the information.

3 Investigate the source. Where, and from whom, is the information coming? Ask yourself, "Why are these people in a unique position to know this information?" If you're reading something on a website, what can you find out about the people who run the site? Be able to identify think tanks, advocacy groups or potential biases in information.

4 Have an understanding of how disinformation (intentional falsehood) is spread. According to the Rand Corporation study, "Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life," the prevalence of social media and ease of access helps proliferate disinformation through bots, autonomous programs that can be easily mistaken for real people, as well as sites such as 4Chan and Reddit.

5 Do a reverse image search, also called content-based image retrieval (CBIR). Search engines such as TinEye Reverse Image Search or Google Reverse Image Search allows information seekers to upload an image and generate search terms based on that image. Reverse image searches can be used to find the original source of a photo and details about it, as illustrated in Caulfield's book.

Campuses Piloting the Digital Polarization Initiative:

- Black Hills State University (S.D.)
- College of Staten Island, The City University of New York
- Georgia College
- Indiana University Kokomo
- Metropolitan State University of Denver
- Millersville University of Pennsylvania
- San Jose State University (Calif.)
- Texas A&M International University
- Texas A&M University-Central Texas
- University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- Washington State University Vancouver

5. Be able to use that information for the need at hand.
6. Communicate that information accurately and properly.

Studies have shown students have particular issues determining the validity of online information. For instance, researchers at Stanford University analyzed over 7,800 responses from middle school through college students for over 18 months and found that students could not tell the difference between advertisements and news stories and had difficulty determining the trustworthiness of information sources.

Two of the researchers—Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew—detailed one of the study's tasks in a 2016 *Education Week* article, "Why Students Can't Google Their Way to the Truth." While comparing information on two websites, more than half of 25 Stanford undergraduates concluded an "article from the American College of Pediatricians, an organization that ties homosexuality to pedophilia and which the Southern Poverty Law Center labeled a hate group, was 'more reliable'" than information from the American Academy of Pediatrics, a 66,000-member professional association of pediatricians established in 1930 that publishes the scholarly journal *Pediatrics*.

"We're asking students to think deeply about the thing in front of them," Caulfield said. "Information may lead students down the wrong path if they haven't done the work of figuring out where it's coming from. There's a way to vet before you read." (See the sidebar on vetting for more information.)

Many information literacy methods designed to suit the needs of students writing papers are outdated, as the need for information literacy isn't limited to the scholarly process. Today, the challenge isn't only academic, it's civic.

"A lot of the techniques we've taught students for how to think about sources and online artifacts are ill-suited to the web as we know it now," Caulfield said. "Citizens go online and are confronted with a vast array of headlines in a day. They have to make quick assessments of the veracity and trustworthiness. They have to understand how misinformation is spread, the drivers of clickbait and astroturfing. We need to give students the power to figure out where they can put their trust."

Caufield plans to work with students across the country to create Wikipedia pages for 1,000 local newspapers to make their fundamental information more visible and to help readers verify their validity.

IU Kokomo is incorporating DigiPo lessons into several courses and disciplines, including freshman seminars, writing, political science, geology and sustainability, targeted as appropriate to the specific courses.

Paul Cook, assistant professor of English and director of writing at IU Kokomo, has taught several courses with a specific focus on information literacy, including one titled "Literacy and Public Life: Fake News and Democracy in the Digital Age." In the class, Cook asked students—so-called "digital natives" who grew up online—to examine their "information diet," the sources of information, news and entertainment they consume on a daily basis, and by which methods.

Polly Boruff-Jones, dean of Library Sciences at IU Kokomo, noted the volume of information available, and the ease with which we can access it via social media and Google searches, has turned us from information seekers to information consumers.

"It's easier to take information in if you're getting news from Facebook or Twitter," she said. "It's just flowing to us because of (algorithms). You get information based on who you choose to follow."

But are we simply binging on news without credibility the way we gorge ourselves on supersized fast food meals—mindlessly, recklessly, and because it's readily available and requires little to no effort? How can we learn to have a balanced diet of information?

A challenge is that students often don't appreciate being compelled to consider information or perspectives they may find distasteful, particularly in the age of safe spaces and trigger warnings.

"As educators, the primary thing we should be trying to do is get students to want to know the truth," Canada said. "If we can get them past wanting to know what is [comfortable], everything else takes care of itself. We can initiate them into a world where truth really matters."

On the campuses that are piloting the DigiPo initiative, students are learning to consider fundamental questions about information sources: Can you tell whether information about a product is being paid for by a company selling that product? Can you spot the difference between an editorial and an advertorial? Should sales and editorial maintain a church-and-state-style separation?

Indeed, a discerning reader needs to be able to determine when it's the money talking and when reporting is truly unbiased. The inability to do so leads not only to the spread of misinformation, but to what has been labeled "information fatigue syndrome" or even "data asphyxiation."

"Without the ability to quickly suss out whether something is worth paying attention to or not, we get mentally overwhelmed as this parade of things streams across our streams," Caulfield said.

In his book *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*, Caulfield coins the phrase "four moves and a habit," encouraging students (and everyone) to incorporate four practices, or moves, and one habit into their digital consumption.

The moves include the following:

1. **Check for previous work**. Has the claim been fact-checked?
2. **Go upstream to the source**. Find the original source of the information to confirm veracity. For instance, if an article refers to a claim someone made in a speech, find a transcript of the speech.
3. **Read laterally**. What can you learn about the author of the information being communicated to you?
4. **Circle back**. If you get lost, take the knowledge you've acquired and start over, using more specific search terms.

The habit is to check your emotions. "When you feel strong emotion—happiness, anger, pride, vindication—and that emotion pushes you to share a 'fact' with others, STOP," he writes. "Above all, these are the claims that you must fact-check."

A study at Beihang University in China found that the fastest-traveling emotion on social media is rage. To only read, or share, information that compels us to have strong emotion is not a show of good judgment.

"If you're going to make an argument, it needs to be rational, and based on facts and sound interpretation," Canada said. "On some level, we realize when people are giving us misinformation or not the whole story. We fall for things that are going to satisfy our emotions or political leanings."

So what drives this bias? Is it politicians? The media? Corporations?

While "fake news and disinformation leans on what people are fascinated with," Cook said, is the fault, to paraphrase Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, not in our stars, but in ourselves?

"We really bear the brunt of the responsibility," Canada said. "There are politicians who disregard the truth, but they wouldn't get away with it if we called them on it more. If you only adhere to information that accords with what you believe, you're not going to know the truth. People have to know the truth even if it hurts."

He cited the famous scene from "A Few Good Men," where Jack Nicholson shouts at Tom Cruise from the witness stand, "You can't handle the truth!"

"Everyone is prone to these biases, but in the world of higher education, we are supposed to be pursuing the truth regardless of what its ramifications might be," Canada said. P

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