

Information Literacy Should Be About Democracy, Not Databases

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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on his views of the implications of the 2024 United States Presidential election for librarians’ conceptions of information literacy work. These conceptions have largely focused on immediate needs and skills, rather than supporting the development of information literate democratic citizens. Ideas are explored for how both public and academic librarians could develop a more explicitly prodemocratic information literacy practice.

Do People Know What They Want?

As an academic librarian who teaches information literacy sessions focused on thinking critically about information, I’m always on the lookout for interesting or provocative statistics to start a class discussion. I bookmarked something in this vein early last year, examining the following question: Do the American people want an authoritarian ruler? Certainly, some do, but the number of people who do is **far** less than the majority, at least according to a survey published by the Pew Research Center (Silver and Fetterolf 2024). Only about 30 percent of those surveyed expressed support for an authoritarian system, and, unlike in some other nations, this support was relatively evenly distributed over the political spectrum in the US. That seemed really encouraging to me at the time, but it wasn’t what I needed for class, so I just filed it away for later.

Over the past few years, I’ve noticed that it’s become, let’s say, fashionable to attribute the behavior of voters to information silos caused by algorithmic gatekeeping on social media. You’ve probably seen books and articles referencing this idea in your collections, no matter what kind of library you work in. Setting that aside for a moment (we’ll come back to it later), we have quite a conundrum if we think about the 2024 presidential election in terms of authoritarianism and information in the context of the article I saved. It seems like most citizens don’t want an authoritarian ruler, and yet the guy who whipped up a mob live on TV to try and overthrow the government when he lost an election wasn’t found to be utterly disqualified. In other words . . . someone basically did one of the most dictator-like things you can do, everyone saw it, and then a whole swath of the citizenry who, again, mostly don’t want a dictator sort of said, “Seems fine to me!” I don’t know about you, but I find this result to be surprising.

But when I started reflecting more on this disconnect between what people say they want and the outcome, I wondered...Should it really have been that surprising? People might

(I think the jury is out on this) be motivated to vote if they believe democracy is threatened, but do they have the information or skills to recognize what a threat to democracy looks like in practice? I think it's pretty probable that they don't. Cast your mind back, back into the mists of time to your high school social studies or history class. Ask yourself, what does the average person learn about the most well-known authoritarian movement in Western cultural memory, the Nazi party led by Adolf Hitler?

If your experience was anything like mine more than two decades ago, you learned a good bit about the Second World War itself and how important America was in resolving it. You **certainly** learned about the Holocaust. But I'm willing to bet you probably didn't learn very much detail about how Hitler actually came to overthrow the Weimar Republic in the first place, nor about how fascism worked in practice to gain control of the government. I definitely don't remember taking a deep dive into ideas about how propaganda "uses virtuous ideals to unite people around otherwise objectionable ends" (Stanley 2018, 24) or how fascist ideas of corruption are about "purity rather than law" (Stanley 2018, 26).

Librarians Teach!

Now at this point, maybe you're thinking, Wait a minute, is this a piece about librarianship or not? Yes, yes it is. My experience has been that librarians, and especially academic librarians, tend to think of themselves as educators generally and **especially** educators about information. In higher education, many librarians are involved in teaching class sessions or whole courses about information. In all kinds of libraries, when we engage in reference work, we try to point people toward truthful information that is of high quality. We think we are providing a public good by participating in a system that allows people access to information when they otherwise cannot afford it and that (when we can) we provide people with the tools, both technological and intellectual, to understand that information. The \$64,000 question* to me is: Are we doing that last part well?

When I look around at what my fellow instructional librarians in higher education are doing, I tend to see a lot of lessons focused on things like:

- Choosing a research topic
- Navigating to and searching databases
- Contrasting scholarly work with non-scholarly work

And all of these activities are great! Academic librarians are really good at these sorts of things, and they absolutely add value to students' academic experience. But if we think about it a little differently, an awful lot of what we are doing seems based on helping a student meet their immediate need to complete an assignment or, perhaps if we're a little more generous, helping a future graduate be an effective worker in their chosen field through a *little bit* of critical thinking about information. This seems to hold true in public libraries as well where, generally, I find that librarians are mostly focused on quickly meeting an immediate information need. In other words, it seems like, in practice, we have a fairly limited or blinkered extent to which we are trying to help people find and understand information. Even when we're firing on all cylinders, there's just some information we aren't giving our patrons the tools to fully understand. We aren't, by and large, planning our work around information

* The \$64,000 Question was a ludicrously popular mid-twentieth-century game show. Just go with it. Watch some old episodes on YouTube later.

literacy for the purposes of being a citizen in a democracy. Maybe we should be. What would that look like?

A More Democratic Information Literacy

Reorienting our ideas of information literacy toward being fundamentally about equipping people to live, participate in, and even potentially defend democracy probably sounds like a big swing. It definitely can be if you want, but I think it could also start with small changes. For example, let's talk about that algorithmic gatekeeping again now. The rapid rise of generative AI and its incorporation into general search tools has given all of us in the profession a perfect layup to score points for team democracy when talking about the algorithmic filtering of information as part of searching. So, let's take it. For those of us in higher education, we can constantly ask students to reflect on the total lack of transparency in these systems and where their information comes from. A more democratic information literacy practice can be as simple as discussing the idea that a small number of companies have a great and invisible influence on what we see while also being totally opaque about how they do so. If democracy is about sharing power and creating systems accountable to the people . . . this ain't it. For those of us in public libraries, the opportunities might be different (I'm imagining a program in a meeting room or classes about technology and computing), but the general idea is the same. Simply discussing with our patrons and communities what **they** think a better information system would look like and how we could get there reinforces both that they have agency and that they can advocate for change.

A more moderate step toward democratic information literacy for someone in academia might be keeping some of our same old lessons but going out of our way to have students research democracy-focused topics, even to the point of stretching out of the comfort zone of the course. For example, at our university, there is a science lab course that the library faculty started teaching a session in several years ago. The goal has always been to help students write better literature reviews first and to understand scientific information second. Traditionally, we've just researched a topic related to the course (think tinnitus in human biology), but perhaps instead we could research why our fellow citizens continue to believe misinformation about health and vaccines despite ample evidence to the contrary. Then, we could discuss how **public** health information should be shared in a democratic society and what the role of the government and individuals would be. In a public library, maybe this might look like hosting a moderated community discussion on public health information, how that information is created, and how it benefits citizens with local health workers.

And now to go big or go home. If we really think democracy is potentially in trouble, that democracy is, in fact, "the worst form of Government except for all those others," as Winston Churchill said, **and** that librarians could help . . . we should consider rethinking our entire approach to information literacy. That would mean wildly altering the kinds of discussions, activities, and programs we engage in. For those in higher education, it might also mean reframing or rewriting our learning objectives. This might look like:

- In an academic library, having students research and discuss why being accurately informed is vital to a functioning democratic system and owning that this is not something we can be "neutral" about

- Doing reading and research to equip ourselves for **way more** discussions in our professional library worker spaces as well as with our patrons, boards, or others about:
 - How empirically based information and knowledge systems are vital parts of liberal democracy**
 - How values inform the way we interpret information, and the way in which some values can be in tension with democratic governance while others enhance it
 - What propaganda looks like in the twenty-first century and how that can differ from ideas we've carried over from the twentieth century
 - How economic and political power relate to information and its production and consumption
- Explicitly creating opportunities to model democratic behavior debate and civic engagement in our libraries of all kinds, including events focused on individual and collective democratic advocacy and evidence-based debate

Rethinking our approach to information literacy to be focused on democratic citizenship won't be easy, but it's probably necessary if we want to have a world where people can recognize that the ground is being laid for a dictatorship before it arrives. If our patrons can learn more about how information systems and democracy are intertwined, they will be more equipped to act on that knowledge when the need arises to defend a republic and keep it.

References

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** One possibility to explore this might be Jonathan Rauch's 2021 book *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*