

College Students as News Consumers

LIBRARIANS WORKING WITH RECENT COLLEGE GRADUATES CAN HELP THEM DEVELOP CURRENT AWARENESS STRATEGIES AND PERSONAL LEARNING NETWORKS THAT WILL SERVE THEM THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS.

BY BARBARA FISTER, MLIS

How do college students keep up with news? How much do they rely on social media to find out what's happening? Can they tell solid reporting from misinformation, hype, or fabricated hoaxes?

These are questions that Alison J. Head and her research team at Project Information Literacy (PIL) set out to explore in a year-long study on young news consumers (the study report, published last year, is available at https://www.projectinfolit.org/news_study.html). Over the past decade, PIL has been the premier source of in-depth basic research into how college students use information. PIL studies have addressed topics such as how first-year students learn the ropes of college research, how recent graduates manage information in the workplace, how course assignments describe research

tasks, and how libraries design spaces for learning.

At a time when public trust in news media is at an all-time low and concern about “fake news” is high, many librarians are seeking ways to help their communities sort truth from misinformation and disinformation. It seemed only natural, then, for PIL to find out what information skills and habits college students employ when it comes to news consumption—and whether the information literacy skills students learn in college transfer to the volatile realm of understanding news today.

With funding from the Knight Foundation and the Association of College and Research Libraries, the PIL research team set out to survey nearly 6,000 students enrolled at 11 universities chosen to be representative in terms of political geography and demographics. To round out the

survey data, 37 telephone interviews were conducted and some 1,600 open-ended survey responses were coded. Finally, more than 700 students shared their Twitter handle so a computational analysis could be made of their news-sharing behaviors, validated with data from a larger national panel of 135,000 college-age Twitter users.

The Social Life of News

In gathering and analyzing all of that data, PIL learned some good news, uncovered some surprises, and discovered some areas of concern. One surprise: To a greater degree than in earlier media studies, students in PIL's study kept up with news. In fact, they feel peer pressure to be informed—more than 90 percent get their news from peers, either face-to-face or, more often, through social media. As one student put it, “news finds me through alerts on my phone and on social media.”

Only a tiny percentage (1.6 percent) reported they did not get news from social media. Facebook was prominent in responses, but Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube were also used at least weekly as a news source by at least half

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of the students surveyed. (Interestingly, among the youngest students in the survey, Snapchat ruled, especially among a small sample of high school seniors surveyed by PIL for the sake of comparison. Nearly half picked up news at least weekly from Snapchat, while Twitter was used as a daily news source by close to a third of respondents. Nearly two-thirds of students got their news from as many as three social platforms.)

But students didn't stop there. Newspaper websites were tapped by three-quarters of students, and 70 percent reported they discussed news with their professors. Students majoring in the humanities, social sciences, and business were most likely to discuss news in their courses or one-on-one with their teachers; STEM majors were less likely to do so, but nearly half heard about news from their professors, especially if it related to their field.

Altogether, students had a broad definition of what constitutes "news" and took a multi-modal approach to keeping up with current events that even embraced political memes, which 82 percent of students engaged with weekly or more often. Humor, for many, was a good way to gain context and to humanize events that might otherwise feel overwhelming.

Another finding of the study: Not only are students interested in keeping up with news, they value the traditional role of journalism in society. Eighty-two percent agreed that "news is necessary in a democracy," and 63 percent said they believe that following news is a civic responsibility. However, confidence in those values was not matched by confidence in the way news is reported.

Coping with Overload and Doubt

While students said traditional journalistic values matter, they frequently expressed doubt that news organizations lived up to them. The respect they expressed for journalism as an institution was often clouded by cynicism.

Distinguishing fake news or disinformation from reliable news reporting was also a significant challenge. Slightly more than half of survey respondents did not have confidence they could recognize fake news, and more than a third agreed that fake news had made them distrust the credibility of *all* news. "It is really hard to know what is real in today's society," one student said. "There are a lot of news sources, and it is difficult to trust any of them."

Another challenge for students was the volume and speed of news. More than two-thirds of the respondents said the sheer amount of news was overwhelming. As one disgruntled student put it, "News just throws itself at you. I don't try to follow the news at all, but it still throws its ugly self into my face on the daily."

Like all news consumers, students were selective, paying the most attention to news that mattered to them and reflected their immediate needs and concerns. Immigration issues were frequently mentioned as a topic of interest because students knew people whose citizenship status was at stake. Others were galvanized by the Parkland school shooting and subsequent student activism, having grown up with active shooter drills. Many paid particular attention to news related to their major, a sign they were beginning to develop current awareness strategies that might help them in their careers.

These emerging strategies for managing the volume of news are particularly intriguing when drilling down into open comments in the survey and follow-up interviews. When looking for information to complete school assignments, students typically filtered their search results using strict parameters set by their professors—sources must come from scholarly publications in a library database or from a select group of reputable news sources. But students were less inclined to evaluate sources carefully for their own use. As one student put it, "When I look at news for my personal life, I am less likely to be concerned if the site is credible or not."

Many students reported they were developing their own approaches to filtering and screening to make information flows manageable and more likely to match their personal interests. They described using a digest such as *The Skimm* or the Apple News app to quickly browse headlines so they would be able to keep up. If something caught their interest, they compared multiple news sources to get more information and ensure they weren't being misled by a biased source.

Implications for Special Librarians

This large mixed-methods study shows that college students are interested in news. They discuss current events in their courses and with their friends; many develop their own coping mechanisms for screening and filtering the flow of news on a daily basis. They value the role of journalism in society and feel it is their civic duty to keep up with current events.

Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of information literacy instruction programs in academia, libraries and librarians played little or no role in students' news habits or in their ability to distinguish reliable news from misinformation or disinformation. Strategies that students described for evaluating sources for their coursework generally didn't transfer into sorting good journalism from disinformation. And only a tiny percentage of students ever discussed news with a librarian.

This should concern academic librarians who feel information literacy is a key component of lifelong learning. But it also has implications for librarians who work with recent graduates and support the work of scientists, policy makers, businesses, or cultural institutions.

Librarians working with recent graduates may find that new employees need help developing current awareness strategies and personal learning networks. Indeed, PIL research from 2016 found that recent graduates felt unprepared to develop questions of their own,



SLA 2019: Diversity Starts at the Top!

SLA Annual Conferences are known for the diversity of their attendees and the topics they discuss—everything from new technologies to leadership and management strategies to communicating value. At SLA 2019, diversity will also be evident in the keynote presentations: A “kindness guru,” a panel of library school deans, and the author of a best-selling book on racist and sexist algorithmic bias in commercial search engines will headline the general sessions.



Leon Logothetis, a broker-turned-adventurer who wrote a book titled *Amazing Adventures of a Nobody* and hosted a National Geographic travel series of the same name, will speak at the opening keynote session on Sunday, June 16. His latest book, *Go Be Kind*, builds on his Netflix series “The Kindness Diaries” by describing a series of daily adventures—treasure hunts, dream dates, awkward moments, and the like—that are intended to help readers rediscover the “gift” of kindness and lead them to a happier and more rewarding life.

The keynote session on Monday, June 17, will take the form of a panel discussion on the future of the information profession and the skills that info pros will need to help organizations navigate the digital revolution. SLA President Hal Kirkwood will moderate the discussion; joining him will be deans of three schools of library and information science:

- **Kendra Albright**, Kent State University;
- **John Gant**, North Carolina Central University; and
- **Sandra Hirsh**, San Jose State University.



Safiya Noble, an associate professor at UCLA, visiting assistant professor at the University of Southern California, and the author of *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, will speak at the closing keynote session, on Tuesday, June 18. Her academic research focuses on the design of digital media platforms on the Internet and their impact on issues of race, gender, culture, and technology.

and a 2012 study found that employers were frustrated by new employees’ reliance on superficial Internet searches. Learning how to develop professionally focused personal learning networks and a means for keeping up with career-relevant news is a service that librarians might provide recent graduates early in their professional lives.

Further, librarians working in special libraries may also be well positioned to help their communities combat misinformation and disinformation by highlighting ways their organization could guide local citizens toward good sources of information about science, health, public policy, or any other topic that relates to their organizational mission. If a goal of information literacy is to support lifelong learning, librarians who work with people in all stages of life have much to contribute, especially in these turbulent times. **SLA**