TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

The new ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Academic librarians should expand our understanding of what counts as an authoritative resource, and be unafraid to challenge long-established wisdom in this domain. Wikipedia is far from perfect, but neither is the Encyclopedia Britannica. Wikipedia is updated daily, while the Britannica is no longer printed. If we cling to the Britannica as a symbol of authoritativeness, we will become obsolete ourselves.

One way to prevent this fate is to reframe our collective thinking. In 2014 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) will issue a revised version of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. The task force shepherding this revision (ACRL, 2012) argues that the standards "should not be reapproved as they exist but should be extensively revised" (pg. 1). This is because the Internet has profoundly altered the ways in which we create, share, analyze and validate information. To be credible, the new ACRL standards must take full account of this change.

INTRODUCTION

In order to prevent professional obsolescence, librarians must reframe their collective thinking on information literacy. In 2014 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) will issue a revised version of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. The task force shepherding this revision (ACRL, 2012) argues that the standards "should not be reapproved as they exist but should be extensively revised" (p. 1). As we librarians know, this is because the Internet has profoundly altered the ways in which people create, share, analyze, and validate information. To be credible, the new ACRL standards must take full account of these changes.

There are positive signs that the new standards will meet this test. Strikingly, the task force makes this claim (ACRL, 2012): "With changes in scholarly communication and the evolving digital landscape, we recognize the need to break down the hierarchical structures for disseminating information and level the information playing field" (p. 5). This is a revolutionary statement for academic librarians. Most of the tools we have developed and the training we offer are in service of hierarchical structures for disseminating information. This is the core of our profession, using perspectives and techniques that have been honed over centuries. Going against this grain is a profound, courageous, and necessary step.

CRITIQUE OF THE ORIGINAL ACRL STANDARDS

The original standards appeared in early 2000. Given that publication date, those standards are understandably cautious about searching the open web. Google was an infant, Wikipedia did not yet exist, and Twitter was a distant development. ACRL's standards refer students to librarian-created tools such as controlled vocabularies and subject-specific databases (ACRL, 2000). Those tools direct users to vetted materials such as articles in scholarly journals or a chapters in academic books. Traditionally these tools did not search the *open* web. Indeed, the standards look warily upon resources that are not formally curated (ACRL, 2000): "Information is available through libraries, community resources, special interest organizations, media, and the Internet--*and increasingly, information comes to individuals in unfiltered formats, raising questions about its authenticity, validity, and reliability*" [italics mine].

Given the ubiquity of false information on the open web, the caution contained in the ACRL standard quoted above is reasonable. As we know some of the false information is simple error; some reflects prejudice; and some stems from a malicious intent to deceive. Any web user needs skills to determine a source that is credible from one that is not. A credible source does not need to be free of all bias, but a credible source will always be transparent in the assumptions and thinking that went into its creation.

By encouraging college students to use librarian-vetted tools, the authors of the original standards hoped to steer them to credible sources. However, it is simply not true that vetted resources are *prima facie* superior to unvetted resources located via a Google search or a Twitter feed. An increasing number of scientific journals have retracted articles they have published in recent years, even though those articles successfully passed through the checkpoint of peer review (Zimmer, 2012). Journal

editors like Drummond Rennie (1986) and Richard Smith (2006) have long warned about the conservatism and mystique surrounding the institution of peer review, which is susceptible to failings like any other human institution.

Just as the established sources have their flaws, so do new sources like Wikipedia entries, blogs, and tweets. Here are some examples. Following the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, traditional news sources offered more credible information than did social networks (Gleick, 2013). Wikipedia entries have been sabotaged (Seelye, 2005). Google search results have been gamed (Segal, 2011).

Born-digital sources have many weaknesses, but we cannot let this blind us to the imperfections of older types of information. Our goal should be to instill within students the ability to critically and objectively examine any piece of information they encounter, wherever they encounter it. The new ACRL standards appear poised to facilitate such an evaluation, but the devil will be in the details.

Assessing the New Standards

The task force co-chairs responsible for the new standards, Trudi Jacobson and Craig Gibson, envision a user-friendly document that eliminates library jargon and acts as a curriculum planning tool rather than a set of firm standards. As Jacobson and Gibson noted (2013), the original standards—replete with jargon and prescriptive criteria—were "overwhelming" in their presentation (p. 2).

Jacobson and Gibson introduced *transliteracy* and *metaliteracy* as important enhancements of the concept of information literacy. Transliteracy is the ability to critically analyze information that appears in all forms, textually, audibly, and visually (Thomas et al., 2007). Metaliteracy is the ability to step back and reflect upon one's own thinking while evaluating a piece of information. Over time a metaliterate person will be able to improve upon his or her evaluative skills (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). This is especially relevant to my argument that students should apply equal critical rigor to sources wherever they find them.

Given that the new standards are intended as a curriculum tool more than a set of rules, it will be hard to fully assess their impact until we know how librarians and faculty members have employed them. To guide that assessment, here are some questions to ponder when the new standards appear. These questions are intended as a means of assessing how well the new standards "break down the hierarchical structures for disseminating information and level the information playing field" (ACRL, 2012).

Do the new standards indicate a continued unease with information that arrives in *unfiltered formats*? Are born-digital information objects such as blog posts or podcasts granted equal status with traditional scholarly literature?

Do the new standards enable a student to cite a Wikipedia entry or blog post as a source in appropriate circumstances? Or is this always forbidden?

Conclusion—The Challenge and Opportunity for Academic Librarians

Academic librarians have developed intricate classification schemes and

extensive collections in support of the needs of scholars and in order to preserve the scholarly record. Our default position has been to develop resources and services that meet the needs articulated by our patrons. There is always an implicit power differential in which academic librarians serve at the behest of their user communities.

Any criticism of established scholarly sources, and any movement to include new types of resources within the academic fold, challenges this power differential. As Amy E. Mark (2011) argued in an earlier issue of *Communication in Information Literacy*, we librarians privilege the peer review system as a reflection of this power dynamic more than on its own merits.

Challenging this power dynamic to assert the value of new information formats will take courage and resolve. It may feel like we are no longer offering service, but rather are starting arguments with the faculty members whom we value as colleagues and collaborators. Academic librarians will need to hone their consultative skills to engage in such conversations and recognize that this is another form of service rather than a departure from our core values.

There is reason to persevere. As R. David Lankes (2013) argued, such service serves our ultimate aim of developing new and useful knowledge. Born-digital information sources are not mere trifles. The argument must be made that the content and credibility of information are distinct and separate from the format of the information. If we surmount the inherent difficulties that will come with making this argument, our reward will be enriching our students' engagement with and understanding of the world.

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