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Leveraging our Trust: Taking Action in Support of Our Democracy

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Leveraging our Trust: Taking Action in Support of Our Democracy

Abstract

Librarians need to build on their trusted status to be more actively engaged in activities that support our democratic system whose success relies on having an informed citizenry. These activities including teaching media literacy skills to patrons in the library as well as in the schools in partnership with teachers. In addition, libraries should be facilitating community conversations and promoting a wide variety of community collaborations that get people engaged and out of their isolated bubbles.

Keywords

media literacy, facilitation, school collaborations, community development

Leveraging Our Trust

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Abstract

Librarians need to build on their trusted status to be more actively engaged in activities that support our democratic system whose success relies on having an informed citizenry. These activities including teaching media literacy skills to patrons in the library as well as in the schools in partnership with teachers. In addition, libraries should be facilitating community conversations and promoting a wide variety of community collaborations that get people engaged and out of their isolated bubbles.

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"[A] popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both."

-James Madison

Public libraries have an important role in our democracy as one of the few public institutions that are still trusted and one which is committed to an informed citizenry. Public libraries demonstrate their commitment to an informed citizenry every day with their literacy programs and by ensuring everyone has access to information. But being informed is trickier than it used to be when a person could simply read the daily newspaper to get a handle on things.

To be well-informed, people need to be more sophisticated consumers of information. They need to be able to recognize fake news sites and to distinguish opinion pieces from investigative journalism. They need to learn to watch the news media with an appropriate amount of skepticism.

Some people rely on Facebook for all their news. They read headlines shared by people they know and presumably trust. Maybe they read the entire article. Maybe they get enough information in the headline to reinforce something

they already believe to be true. So they share it again.

Some people get their news from their favorite "news" source. These sources are also trusted because they support their view. Arguments that support a different view may come from other "news" sources, but they are discounted as partisan. In fact, broadcast media in general is perceived by many as biased and unreliable. The days of the trustworthy journalist (e.g. Walter Cronkite) appear to be over.

Public librarians have a duty to build on the fact that we are trusted by our communities to connect our constituents with reliable information and the best way to do that is to teach media literacy skills.

As we learned from the days of the Internet Public Library and the Librarians Internet Index, we cannot curate the Internet. We do not have the resources to keep up with the number of fake news sites that pop up by the hour. Instead of giving people a list of authoritative and trustworthy sources, we need to teach people the

skills they need to distinguish reliable information from unreliable information while still acknowledging multiple points of view. And then, in order to continue to be trusted, we need to allow them to form their own beliefs based on that fuller understanding of their chosen information sources.

To move in this direction, public libraries could start offering media literacy programs and sharing guidelines about how to identify real and fake news. For the people that aren't likely to attend a program, why not provide hand-outs, display informational posters, and share information assessment tips in the form of bookmarks?

Media literacy is a skill that people of all ages need. Studies show that kids aren't learning these skills in school. Community librarians and teachers could collaborate to incorporate these skills into the curriculum. I can imagine a treasure hunt game that would teach media literacy skills and reward the kids who use those skills. Who better to design such a game than a children's librarian!

Librarians should also be active in evaluating useful plug-ins and apps that help people identify fake news sites while browsing. Plug-ins like FiB and LazyTruth can alert them when headlines misrepresent the content of articles forwarded to them via email or shared via Facebook.

Librarians could play an active fact-checking role on social media – letting people know about common hoaxes and pointing people to Snopes or Emergent to verify their accuracy. Instead of “staying out of politics” in the recent election, I would have liked to see librarians on Facebook referring people to Factcheck.org and Politifact.com when appropriate, and providing additional context to things reported.

I'd like to see librarians leverage the safe space of their libraries by facilitating community conversations about proposed policies and candidate's positions so issues could be fully, and safely, explored from all sides.

Facilitating community conversations serves many purposes. It brings people out of their so-called “bubbles” to hear another perspective. When facilitation is done well, people feel more open to hearing different ideas and perspectives. Intentionally bringing people together in this way builds connections between people in the community and everyone learns something.

Participants learn about resources and opportunities beyond the library walls so they are less isolated and more empowered. Library staff learn more about the needs of their community members so they can better target their resources and services to things that are urgently needed.

“Bad libraries build collections.

Good libraries build services (of which a collection is one). Great libraries build communities.”

- R. David Lankes

Librarians may also learn about people in their community that can be assets. As R. David Lankes says, the community is your collection. Great libraries, he says, are the ones that don't just limit their services to those that can be delivered by library staff. Great libraries build communities and engage community members in delivering services to one another.

If we are truly committed to an informed citizenry, the job of the public librarian today is more akin to an activist than an archivist. Teaching media literacy, acting as fact-checkers, facilitating community conversations, collaborating with teachers and other organizations in the community – these are action steps. It isn't enough to organize a collection and wait for people to come use it. As representatives of a

trusted profession and a trusted public institution committed to our American democracy, we are duty-bound to do as much to leverage that trust as we can.