

CommonKnowledge

Summary of Patron Input for News Literacy Toolkit

In 2017, the Pacific Library Partnership (PLP) received a grant to develop a News Literacy Toolkit to help PLP libraries support their patrons navigating dramatic changes in the news and media landscape. The initial look at PLP patron news literacy needs began with an online survey of PLP librarians in the summer of 2017, followed by an October 3rd Workshop and small group discussions with librarians and local media. This was supplemented by direct contact with approximately 50 PLP patrons through five events:

- Nov 30 – Pop up interviews at Burlingame Public Library (mix of young families, seniors)
- Dec 5 – Young adults focus group Los Gatos Public Library
- Dec 6 – AM: Newcomers focus group at Cupertino Public Library; PM: Interactive Workshop at Berkeley Public Library
- Dec 7 – Interactive Workshop at City of Santa Clara Public Library

The purpose of each event was to develop a “user-based” lens to better understand people's needs and feelings in the current media environment. Patrons with a variety of ages, living situations, ethnicities, education levels and countries of origin were represented. The following notes speak to highlights of what was learned during these late fall sessions.

How do people get their news?

Consistent with industry surveys, older patrons were more likely to get their news from television and newspapers. However, several also talked about using online sources. Most of the younger patrons reported that they are using online platforms, representing a mix of established media organizations and social media platforms. For TV, people spoke about channels that are international, national and local. Commercial radio and public radio were also cited by some. A wide variety of specific news organizations were mentioned for both print and online. Some mentioned referring to comedy shows that also provide news updates and/or seeing what their friends are talking about.



Changes people mentioned in how they get their news

The majority indicated there have been significant changes in how they get their news and how they are experiencing the changes in the media landscape. Both older and younger patrons talked about using a phone or tablet instead of a hard copy newspaper. Some spoke specifically about going from “analog to digital.” TV viewers mentioned the phenomenon of the 24-hour news cycle and the repetitive nature of what they were viewing during the day. Online news users also spoke to the “24-7” nature of the news combined with the proliferation of sources. Many spoke about the increased use of Facebook and other social media platforms as news sources.

- *“There’s an explosion of sources. The volume!”*
- *“The news is coming at you 24/7. It’s always with you. You don’t get a break.”*
- *“My friends will post something and that makes me want to research that topic.”*
- *“I’m trying to decide if Twitter is news or just statements.”*

This increased volume of news activity was accompanied by a reduced sense of clarity and confidence in what to follow and what to trust. Almost all patrons talked about having to “work harder” to get a coherent sense of a news story or situation. People mentioned increased circulation of “rumors on the internet” that they had to navigate. Some shared that they used to have one TV channel and one newspaper they followed. Today, many recognize the need to check sources – but several wanted help choosing sources that were reliable.

- *“If there's news about an accident or an event, I feel like I can trust it. With political news, it's harder to decide.”*
- *“I have limited time, so I stick to the mainstream news sources. I don't have time to evaluate the others.”*
- *“It's harder to select what to follow.”*
- *“Nobody is flat out lying, just what they emphasize. It's very difficult to get a balanced perspective.”*
- *“I want the full story and they don't have it.”*

In addition to the flood of sources with uncertain reliability, several patrons spoke to increased negativity in the news and/or the superficial nature of what was being provided.

- *“I feel like there is more fear mongering these days.”*
- *“The morning news is more like entertainment. And nightly TV news is too sensationalized.”*
- *“It's depressing and overwhelming. How does it affect our brain?”*
- *“Sometimes I just stay away from the news.”*

Uneven understanding of the economics of the changing media landscape

While there was widespread awareness of changes in the news landscape and a general understanding of the need to be attentive to political bias, there was limited understanding of how news organizations get their funding and how social media has dramatically changed the business model for advertising revenue. Only a very few patrons volunteered comments about consolidation of media organizations and/or a reduction in trained journalists.



The conversation among the newcomers group included peer-to-peer sharing of basics about what is sponsored, and how news organizations and social media platforms support themselves: *“What you click changes what you see.”* There appeared to be interest in what one person called “feed literacy” and another asked: *“How does Facebook make money?”* Only one patron expressed understanding that “click bait” was designed solely to generate ad revenue versus inform the reader.

During the focus groups and workshops, concepts that helped provide more context about changing advertising incentives were welcomed and appreciated.

How can the library help patrons?

For many, the library was not initially top of mind as an ally in navigating the new media landscape. This was a representative comment: *"I never thought of the library as a resource for this."* Yet, most these patrons were frequent library users who readily spoke of the library as "neutral" and "reliable," the very attributes they are seeking as they navigate the news.

The focus group and workshop sessions helped people think about the possibilities of how libraries could be a resource. Almost all patrons wanted help selecting and connecting with quality news sources. Many were not aware of the free news and magazine resources provided by the library – those who were indicated appreciation. Several also wanted tools to help verify stories as reliable and build their skills in sorting fact from fiction.

Focus group participants emphasized that they did not want to be told what to think or read. *"Give me the tools and I'll decide for myself."* These are examples for the overall kind of support these patrons asked for:

- *"Recommend or bookmark trustworthy sources."*
- *"Which newspapers are the most honest in reporting?"*
- *"I'd like to be able to get critical thinking tools that would help me be able to pick through it all."*
- *"I want help selecting fact vs opinion."*
- *"Spotting fake news is a skill you need to practice."*
- *"Have programs teaching about media literacy."*

People were also provided with example resources to react to. These were the most popular formats across this sample of PLP patrons:

- Lists of media sources and factcheckers
- Interactive presentations about news and media
- Discussions about the issues
- Online quizzes and links
- Tip sheets (like the IFLA handout)
- Posters/infographics

Many patrons also shared how much they liked being able to talk about the news as they try to determine what to rely on. On the other hand, some younger patrons wanted an online tool they could do on their own: *"People are less likely to come for a long presentation. People are so busy. Give it to them in a way they can take their own time."* One person liked the idea of being able to test oneself in private: *"You don't want to look like the idiot."*

A few final suggestions:

- *"Put tools right where people will use them, next to the computer."*
- *"Have fun trivia classes or game-related info sessions."*
- *"A mini workshop about your feed."*

Overall, patrons we spoke with welcome efforts aimed at providing access to quality news sources, opportunities to talk about current events and tools, such as factcheckers, that can help them make better choices. As trusted sources, libraries are uniquely positioned to provide news literacy supports.