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Ways That Information Can Be Good

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Ways that Information can be Good:

*Rethinking our Aims in Teaching the Evaluation of
Information*

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I'm a Teaching and Learning Librarian at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. I just moved to the West in October, so it's a treat to get to spend time with my new neighbors in California. Thanks to the conference organizers for this opportunity.

Rather than use this session to report on a completed project, I'm going to use it to test out some ideas for a reflective article that I've been working on. Like the other presenters, I'll share some ideas for the first 15 minutes or so, and then I really look forward to your questions and feedback.

Roadmap:

- *First-year undergraduate research and learning for political participation involve important parallels.*
- The value of information lies in its capacity to stimulate learning.
- Librarians need to collaborate with instructors to help students become *connoisseurs* of information.

As this slide shows, there are three big ideas that I want to share:

- First-year undergraduate research and research for political participation involve important parallels.
- The value of information lies in its capacity to stimulate learning. Seems like common sense, but it's something that's easy to overlook.
- We need to work with our institutional partners to find opportunities to help students become *connoisseurs* of information.



I work *a lot* with first-year undergraduates, and the sort of research that they do is at the center of my thinking for this project. First-year research experiences set students up for self-directed learning in subsequent years of their formal education, but I think it's important for other reasons as well. There are important parallels between the research that students do in first-year classes, especially first-year English classes, and the type of self-directed learning required for understanding the political issues that come up in public discourse.



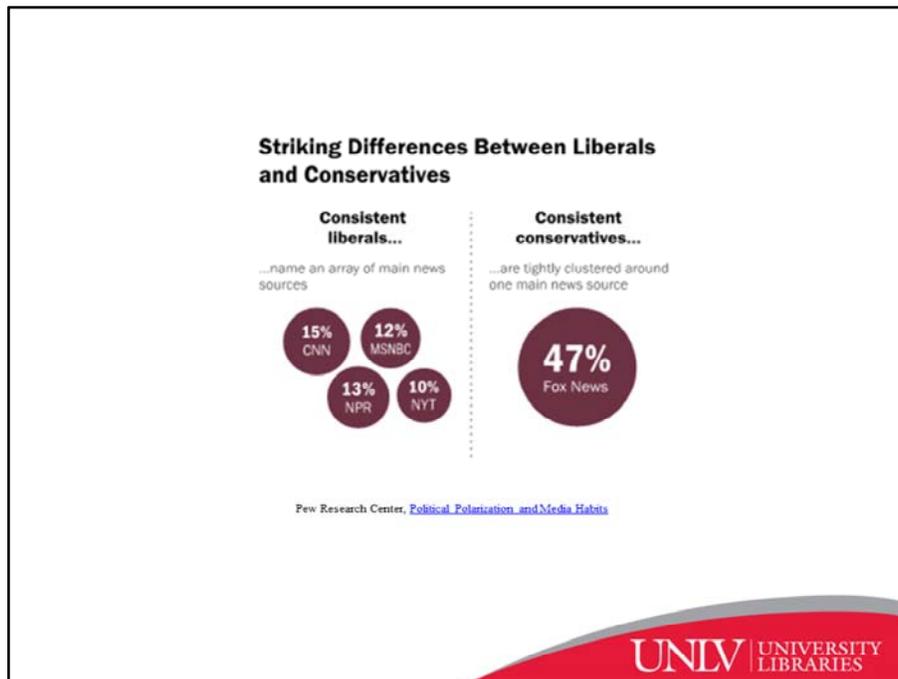
Here is the first parallel: There are some parts of the world where only experts dare to tread. There are other areas where, if you want to take part, you have to just get out there. For first-year English and public discourse, you just have to get out there.

The iconic research assignment for first-year English involves presenting a researched argument that defends a thesis about a controversial issue. Students are asked to do research on this controversial question without the benefit of expertise or discipline-based methods of learning (most are too new to college to have mastered such methods).

Outside of the classroom, if you want to participate in public discourse or other aspects of democracy, you face a similar challenge. For example, if you want to cast an informed vote with respect to gun control, you need to develop a position on that question, even though you probably aren't an expert in a field that investigates the gun control issue directly. It's a matter of developing an intelligent perspective on a controversial issue, even though you aren't an expert on that issue.



Here's a second parallel: Both involve a significant risk for conclusion-driven research or conclusion-driven learning. We probably have worked with students who write their research paper without consulting outside sources, then look for some sources to “back up” their thesis. They have their path, and they're not veering from that path. That's conclusion-driven research, and it's a problem because it's a strategy that deprives students of opportunities for exploration and genuine learning.



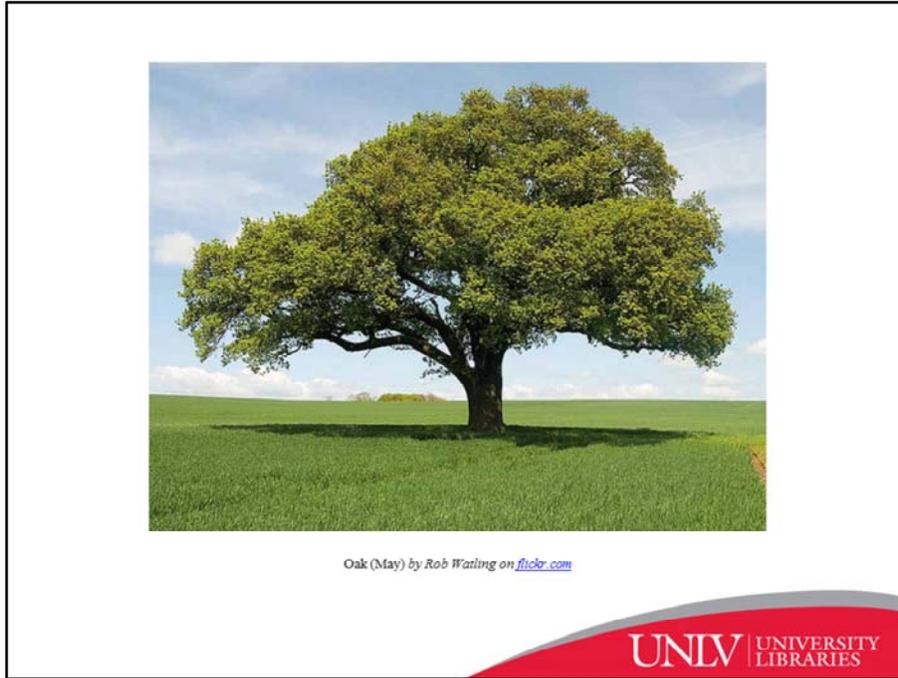
With respect to public discourse, we hear about “selective exposure” to media sources, which means that we tend to surround ourselves with media sources that confirm our existing opinions. A 2014 Pew study points to a correlation between selective media exposure and the polarizing nature of the way that we talk about and learn about politics. There’s a cyclical dynamic between the two: those with a narrow media diet tend to exhibit higher degrees of partisanship, and those at the far ends of the ideological spectrum tend to consult news sources that are consistent with their ideological positions.

Selective exposure bugs me, on a lot of levels, and I would like to see higher education address it more directly, especially because I see it as an information literacy problem. One way that librarians can get the ball rolling is to use our influence on students and instructors to encourage genuine inquiry rather than conclusion-driven research. I think the way we teach students to evaluate sources has to be a part of that effort.

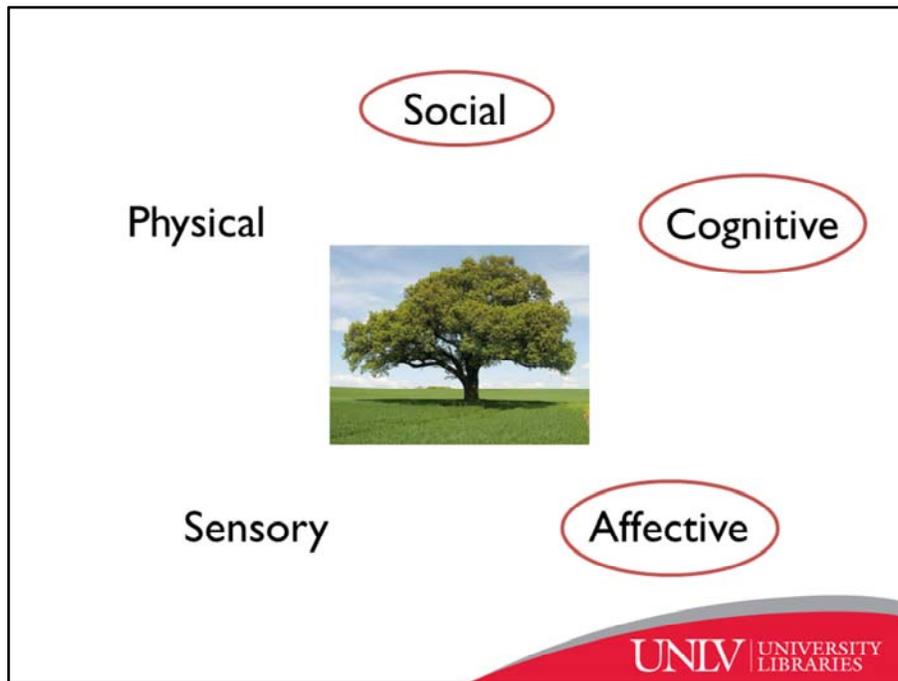
Roadmap:

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- Librarians need to collaborate with instructors to help students become *connoisseurs* of information.

I think there's a strong connection between the methods that we use to teach evaluation and the conception of information's value that serves as the basis for our efforts. If you take a look at the chart on the purple handout, you will see a breakdown of two of the methods that I have tried for teaching evaluation. On the right is a new method that I have been scheming on. I feel like a complete education in the evaluation of information will involve all three of these methods, but the one on the right is new, so let's talk about that one.



Because I wasn't satisfied with approaches that centered on credibility or on how a source works in your argument, I tried to find a different basis for judging whether information is good. In his book *What is Good and Why*, philosopher Richard Kraut argues that a thing is good if it contributes to a living being's health, growth, and development, or *flourishing*. According to Kraut: "For most things, to flourish is simply to be healthy: to be an organism that is unimpeded in its growth and normal functioning" (5).



But what does it mean for a human being to flourish? To quote Kraut: “A flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers). Those, in the broadest outlines and roughly speaking, are the categories of well-being” (137). And I would argue that good information has the potential to contribute to social, cognitive, and affective dimensions of human flourishing.

Disruptive Information



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I would also argue that information makes its most profound contribution when it has a *disruptive* quality, when it knocks us out of our established patterns of thought and feeling and calls on us to grow to accommodate a new perspective. Information that challenges us does more to help us flourish than information that simply confirms our existing thoughts and feelings. Disruptive information is an occasion for development – information that is essentially old news, not so much.

Roadmap:

- First-year undergraduate research and learning for political participation involve important parallels.
- The value of information lies in its capacity to stimulate learning.
- *Librarians need to collaborate with instructors to help students become connoisseurs of information.*

For students to develop their ability to attend to the disruptive quality of information, they need to become something like *connoisseurs* of information.

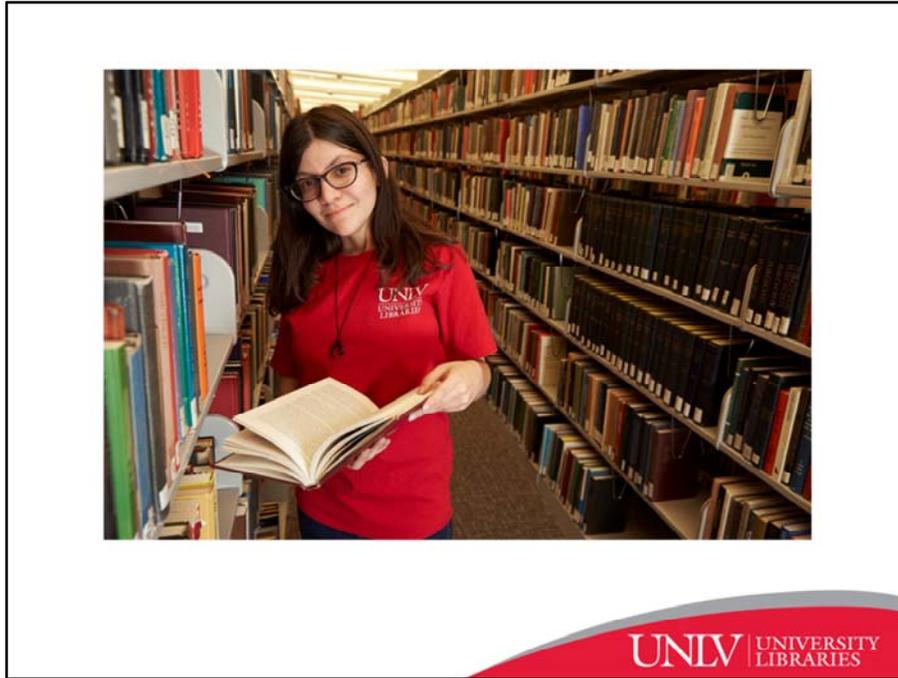


A connoisseur is attentive to the subtle qualities in a work of art or in a glass of wine, but they also have an awareness of how their own experiences and tastes contribute to their encounter with the art or with the wine. There's a high level of awareness for what's going on in, say, a painting, but there's also a heightened awareness of what's happening subjectively. This type of bi-directional awareness would help a connoisseur of information judge whether new information has had a significant impact, or whether it has left her thoughts and feelings essentially unchanged.

So how do we encourage that sort of awareness in first-year undergraduates? Many students in first-year English will complete an annotated bibliography of potential sources before they start writing their researched argument. If we can work with our instructor colleagues to tweak the annotated bibliography assignment a bit, that would provide an opportunity to encourage their students to examine their sources through learning-focused lenses.

- Which information source **surprised** you the most? Why?
- Which position do you find most convincing? What factors in your **personal background or belief-system** contribute to this assessment?
- What would make the most convincing position **even more convincing for you?**
- Was the most **convincing** source also the most **surprising** source? Why or why not?
- How would someone from a **different socio-economic group** think about the question?
- What do you still need to **learn** more about?

The typical annotated bibliography has students cite their sources and give a brief summary and maybe some ideas about how the source might fit into their argument. As you can see on the handout, I am suggesting that we add questions that call on students to consider the sources they are working with in light of their prior experiences. My hope is that they will prompt students to pay attention to (and value) those sources that stimulate some movement, activity, or growth.



I am also hopeful that if we can discourage conclusion-driven research in academic contexts, students will have a better shot at developing a sensibility for learning that will exert itself outside the classroom as well. I think our democracy would benefit from having participants who consistently ask themselves, “What have I really learned today?”

Thank you!