



Information Literacy Section, Africa Section, Access to Information Network - Africa

# Promoting Civic Literacy Through Library Reference Work

***Confronting selective information delivery, media and political spin, lack of governmental transparency and propaganda***

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# Civic literacy is about:

- Information gathering
- Critical thinking
- Judgment
- Action

The reference librarian can and should help the citizen with all these steps.

# Information gathering perspectives

The media-dominated Westernizing world today is characterized by partial, incomplete information

- Factoids, sound bites and film clips
- Interpretation over content
- Hidden agendas and government spin
- Selective data, damn lies and propaganda
- *The Man with a Movie Camera* and the Kulishov effect – emotions and motivation through editing

# The citizen's information paradox

## Everyone says

There is an **information overload** bombarding everyone constantly nowadays from print and broadcast media and the Internet which **makes informed public judgement impossible.**

## But actually

Information packaging and oversimplification are so prevalent that there is **far too little substantive data** in the information stream for the citizen **to make any informed judgements** in the public sphere.

# Helping citizens gather information

Reference librarians must help citizens to select substantive, highly relevant, timely information from a variety of points of view and issue perspectives, and from outside the mediated, watered down information stream.

- This overcomes the information paradox.
- Tell your clients: don't trust the government press releases or the media pundits. ***THINK!***

# Critical thinking cues for citizens

- Most people who come to a reference desk do not know how to think critically about the information and documentation we provide.
- The ethics of professional information delivery prevent us from telling people what to think.
- But we should point out issues such as the political or economic bias of the resources, their completeness or selectivity of coverage, and try to provide alternative viewpoints and data.
- **Do not abdicate responsibility for information quality and just throw a pile of paper at the client. Evaluate.**

# Political Cant and the Critique of Pure Garbage

- In his *Critique of Pure Reason* the German philosopher Immanuel Kant showed that trying to deduce all true things from previous universal truths fails: we need to bring in our common sensory experience to find out what is true.
- “Political cant” is an insincere, conventional expression of enthusiasm for ideals or sound policy, masking real political motives. Help the client critique it using humor and common sense.

## We hold these truths to be self-evident

- It is healthy for democracy for librarians and for citizens to be suspicious of the motives of their government and of the content of the media.
- All power corrupts. Information exposes it.
- Everyone lies a little because we want to be liked. Politicians lie more often and more blatantly because their careers depend upon being liked.
- “What everybody knows” is very often wrong.
- It is our first role as librarians supporting civic literacy to help citizens discern true information, not to defend current government policy or street opinion.

# Judgement Day

- Hold workshops and provide reference displays in your library on current public issues, pro and con, to help citizens make up their minds.
- Disseminate information on elections and other voting occasions to reference clients, to let them know how to register and where to vote. Do not tell them how to vote, but let them know that as a citizen you too will be voting.
- Civic literacy needs a memory. Collect and archive your reference materials and answers on important local and national public issues. They may come back to haunt you in five or ten years, as public sentiment and policy change and a new vote looms.

# Supporting citizen action

- Maintain a file of contact information for public interest action groups so you can refer clients to them. This includes the political opposition.
- Bookmark good public interest group websites and update them regularly. Beware of Internet popularity rankings as a tool to discover them.
- Make your library available for non-partisan public meetings and provide information resources on the issues beforehand.
- Provide formats and addresses for writing to elected representatives.

# Civic literacy requires you to act as a reference librarian

- In guiding citizens to diverse and good-quality information on political and economic issues
- In helping them to think critically about that information's strengths and weaknesses
- In supporting citizen decision-making on public issues right through to voting day
- In helping citizens who want to get involved in public action, and archiving its outcomes

Libraries civilize.

**That means  
THEY CREATE CITIZENS.**