

Teaching Information Literacy in Untrusting Times: Prioritize Research for Understanding (Not Just Knowledge)



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Agenda

- ◇ Setting up the problem: credible resources in a time of low trust?
 - ◇ Indicators of declining trust
 - ◇ What does declining trust mean for the academic library?
- ◇ Lesson plan on trust and research
- ◇ Philosophical distinction between knowledge and understanding
 - ◇ Aiming for understanding curbs demotivating aspects of skepticism
 - ◇ Emphasizing understanding brings nuance to the term *argument*



Indicators of Declining Trust

◆ Pew Research Center, 2022

◆ % of US adults who have _____ of confidence in *medical scientists* to act in the best interests of the public.

◆ 29% a great deal (down from 40% in late 2020)

◆ 49% a fair amount

◆ 22% not to much/no confidence at all



Indicators of Declining Trust

◆ AP-NORC Poll, 2023

- ◆ In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the news media when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?
 - ◆ 16% a great deal/a lot
 - ◆ 39% a moderate amount
 - ◆ 45% a little/none

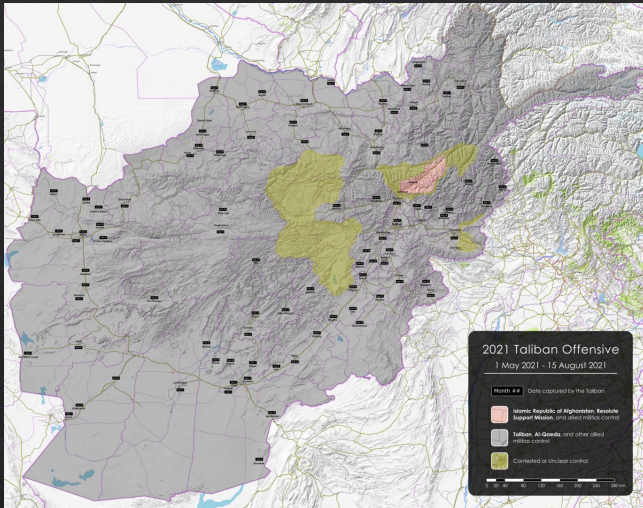


Indicators of Declining Trust

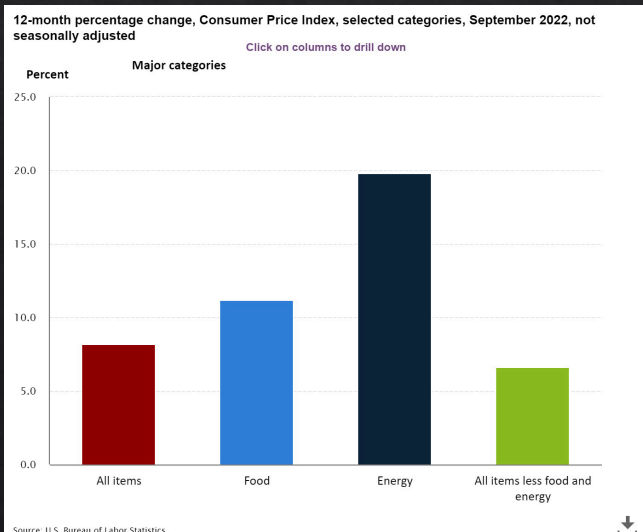
◆ APNews.com, May 1, 2023

◆ “Everyone tells a different story. The media does nothing but stir up fear,” said [Janis] Fort, a retired 71-year-old Republican who lives in Navarre, Florida. “For me, and for most of the people I know, we feel like we’re totally in the dark.”

Experts in the zeitgeist of 2022



All these depressing examples [of expertise gone wrong] have one common denominator: elite experts and degree-holding professionals massaged and warped their knowledge to serve ideological masters rather than the truth. In the process, they caused untold damage to their country and their fellow citizens...Is it any wonder why the Western public has lost confidence in their degreed and credentialed elites? (Hanson, 2022)





What does this mean for the academic library?

- ◆ Academic library → convenient way to find expert knowledge.
- ◆ What if our students are suspicious expert knowledge?
- ◆ What if *librarians* are suspicious of expert knowledge?
- ◆ How do we speak *authentically* about the importance of library research when we have these questions in mind?

Leading voices in IL say...

- ◆ ...students should be critical of systems that privilege some information sources over others (ACRL, 2015).
- ◆ ...students should be open to points of view outside the mainstream (ACRL, 2015).
- ◆ ...students should rely on mainstream, authoritative sources (like *WaPo*) to help them identify disinformation (Caulfield, 2018).
- ◆ ...students may view the *WaPo* as untrustworthy because it is the product of agenda-driven liberal elites (Fister, 2021).





Lesson Plan: Talking about Trust

Learning outcomes:

- ◆ Students will reflect on societal attitudes toward authority in order to identify factors that make trust difficult.
- ◆ Students will articulate ways that experts can build trust with their audience in order to better grasp the point of their own work as researchers.

Discussion questions come from Pew Research Center's "Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines" (Kennedy, Tyson & Funk, 2022)

Warmup 1

- ◇ When it comes to *medical scientists*, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
 - ◇ A great deal of trust
 - ◇ A fair amount of trust
 - ◇ Not too much trust/no trust at all

Warmup 2

- ◇ When it comes to *other kinds of scientists*, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
 - ◇ A great deal of trust
 - ◇ A fair amount of trust
 - ◇ Not too much trust/no trust at all

Warmup 3

- ◇ When it comes to *public school principals*, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
 - ◇ A great deal of trust
 - ◇ A fair amount of trust
 - ◇ Not too much trust/no trust at all

Warmup 4

- ◇ When it comes to *journalists*, how much trust do you have that they will act in the best interests of the public?
 - ◇ A great deal of trust
 - ◇ A fair amount of trust
 - ◇ Not too much trust/no trust at all

Pew Research Center, Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines, February 2022

- ◇ % of US adults who have ____ of confidence in *medical scientists* to act in the best interests of the public.
 - ◇ 29% a great deal (down from 40% in late 2020)
 - ◇ 49% a fair amount
 - ◇ 22% not to much/no confidence at all

Pew Research Center, Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines, February 2022

- ◇ % of US adults who have ____ of confidence in *other types of scientists* to act in the best interests of the public.
 - ◇ 29% a great deal (down from 39% in late 2020)
 - ◇ 48% a fair amount
 - ◇ 22% not to much/no confidence at all

Pew Research Center, Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines, February 2022

- ◇ % of US adults who have ____ of confidence in *public school principals* to act in the best interests of the public.
 - ◇ 14% a great deal (down from 21% in late 2020)
 - ◇ 50% a fair amount
 - ◇ 35% not to much/no confidence at all

Pew Research Center, Americans' Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines, February 2022

- ◇ % of US adults who have ____ of confidence in *journalists* to act in the best interests of the public.
 - ◇ 6% a great deal (down from 9% in late 2020)
 - ◇ 34% a fair amount
 - ◇ 60% not to much/no confidence at all

What happened? Why the decline?



In a climate of declining trust, what can researchers do to show their audience (and themselves) that they know what they are talking about?





Steering discussion back to annotated bibliography

Two magazine articles conclude that UNLV is an excellent university for undergraduate students to attend. Consider each article's sources. Which article do you trust more?

<i>Sources for Article A</i>	<i>Sources for Article B</i>
UNLV President	UNLV Vice President for Student Affairs
UNLV Vice President for Student Affairs	President of the UNLV Student Government
UNLV History Professor	Recent graduate who has not yet found work in their field of study
UNLV Librarian	CEO of a major employer in Las Vegas
UNLV Athletic Director	A UNLV undergraduate who just completed their first year



Keep it real

First-year
research
project.

I don't know
anything
about this.

I read
something
on this
question and
have some
ideas.

I have been
studying this
issue for
years – I'm
an expert.



A helpful distinction in aims of learning

- ◆ The aim of *knowledge* is the accumulation of true beliefs and the avoidance of false beliefs.
 - ◆ “Help me find credible sources that will help me find out what really happened, not disinformation.”
- ◆ The aim of *understanding* is finding coherent order among seemingly disparate occasions of meaning, whether they be beliefs, sensations, symbols, questions, or probabilities.
 - ◆ “Help me find a review of the literature that will improve my understanding of this field of study.”



More on understanding

- ◆ Understanding “involves seeing the relation of parts to other parts and perhaps even the relation of parts to the whole...One’s mental representation of what one understands is likely to include such things as maps, graphs, diagrams, and three-dimensional models...” (Zagzebski, 2001)
- ◆ Learning how things fit together applies to
 - ◆ A mechanic’s understanding of an engine (Riggs, 2003)
 - ◆ Learning a new language
 - ◆ Understanding a research conversation within a discipline, and where the gaps exist



Why understanding now?

- ◇ *Skepticism “is a threat to our motivation because motivation to reach X requires both the belief that reaching X is possible and some way of telling how well we have done after we have made the attempt.” (Zagzebski, 2001)*
 - ◇ Knowledge: Is research leading me to true beliefs? How can a student researcher tell when experts disagree or are discredited?
 - ◇ Understanding: Is research making my understanding of a research question more thorough?
 - ◇ Am I discovering perspectives I didn't know about before?
 - ◇ Is my grasp of the points of disagreement improving?
 - ◇ Am I discovering new questions that I wasn't aware of before?



Understanding and Our Teaching Practices

Encourages Learning as Understanding	Discourages Learning as Understanding
Deep learning	Superficial/strategic learning
“Research as Conversation” metaphor	Argument as using sources to “back up” your thesis
Exploratory annotated bibliographies	“Be sure to include a counterclaim”
Reviews of the Literature	
Discussing journalism ethics	

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