Information Literacy in the Age of Algorithms: First Findings

Presenters: Alison Head, Ph.D. and Barbara Fister
Thursday, November 7, 2019, 2 p.m. - 3:30 p.m. (reception to follow), Askwith Hall, Longfellow Hall, 13 Appian Way, Harvard Graduate School of Education

We live in an era of ambient information. On average, over 40,000 searches are made on Google every second; 40 million YouTube videos are viewed in a minute, three million photos are uploaded to Instagram in an hour, and 1.5 billion users log into Facebook daily. While platforms such as these have a colossal presence in daily life and have influenced our political landscape, how much do students and faculty know about how these influential Internet giants work and how, in turn, they work on society?

Information literacy has been promoted in colleges and universities for decades, yet it tends to focus on immediate needs: how to use web and library resources to complete assignments, and assuming that exploring information independently will give students transferable skills and a capacity to critically assess information in the workplace and as participants in a democracy. Our qualitative study posed several essential questions for our times: How have these platforms and the ways their algorithms shape our understanding of the world influenced how undergraduates conceptualize information? To what extent are the implications of this significant shift in our information landscape finding their way into college classrooms? Is enough attention being paid to how profoundly our information landscape has changed?

Early findings from nearly 150 interviews with faculty and students at eight U.S. colleges and universities suggest students are aware and concerned about the impact of commercially-driven algorithmic systems on their lives, yet feel powerless; and faculty are alarmed about their loss of privacy and the influence these systems have on society, yet rarely discuss those issues in their classes. In this presentation, we will explore the effect algorithms are having on knowledge and extrapolate what that means for teaching and learning, as we encourage educators to wrestle with current technological and social trends in order to help students become information literate in the age of algorithms.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has funded the algorithm study with support from Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), ER&L, a leading library conference, and the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina.

Alison J. Head, Ph.D., is the Principal Investigator on the Algorithm Study, and the founder and director of Project Information Literacy (PIL), a national research institute that studies what it is like to be a student in the digital age. She is an information scientist and social science researcher and a Visiting Research Scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Senior Researcher at the metaLAB (at) Harvard.

Barbara Fister is Professor Emerita at Gustavus Adolphus College and serves as the inaugural Scholar-in-Residence with Project Information Literacy. She taught information literacy courses and workshops for over three decades and is a columnist for Inside Higher Ed.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact the organizer for this event: Alex Hodges, Librarian and Director of Gutman Library and HGSE Faculty, alex_hodges@gse.harvard.edu