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National Study on Information Literacy among College Students in the Age of Algorithms

Support from the Knight Foundation, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and ER&L

Santa Rosa, Calif. – Project Information Literacy (PIL), a nonprofit research institute, is marking its 10th anniversary by launching a national study looking at the future of information literacy among college students. The research, conducted by Alison Head and Barbara Fister, will examine today’s information environment and the impact of one of its most defining features — algorithms — the endless lines of opaque coding that make lightening-fast calculations and decisions for and about us that affect the course of our everyday lives in both helpful and unhelpful ways.

Grounded in knowledge gained from PIL’s decade of large-scale studies on how college students find and use information for course work and in their personal lives, and more recently, on the interplay of journalism, new platforms, and trust in media, a special research report will summon educators to embrace the challenge of understanding new forms and channels of information beyond academia. A set of recommendations will be offered for three groups — librarians, educators, and journalists — that work where information and young adults intersect.

“When librarians and educators first adopted information literacy as an essential educational outcome, algorithm-driven platforms like Google, Facebook, and YouTube did not exist,” said Dr. Alison J. Head, the director of PIL and an information scientist and a senior researcher at the metaLAB at Harvard. “Now colossal online platforms with their invisible switches and filters have tremendous potential to influence our opportunities, what we see and learn, what we think, and ultimately, who we are.”

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and ER&L, a leading library conference, are sponsoring PIL’s latest research effort, the eleventh study for the influential PIL project. New data from interviews with more than 100 students and faculty on six different college
campuses across the country will be included. Data will be collected about faculty and student awareness of black-box algorithms that are dramatically influencing the information they encounter and impacting their ability to distinguish facts from falsehoods in the news and information they may receive.

Concerns about the hidden power of algorithms have continued to mount in recent months for users of popular platforms. Early last year, a breaking news story revealed Cambridge Analytica used powerful algorithms to trawl through millions of Facebook profiles and develop a targeted campaign to sway users’ voting habits. More recently, Pinterest and YouTube are wrestling with decisions about content moderation in the face of misinformation about vaccines and the lightning-fast spread of extremist propaganda. Even platforms that control the complex proprietary code that determines what we see can be caught unprepared when the systems they designed to persuade shoppers are used to spread noxious ideologies. Students need to learn how algorithms affect the information that streams at them constantly throughout the day in order to be truly information literate in the 21st century.

“We are raising critical questions at a time when higher education needs to pay more attention to how profoundly our information landscape is changing,” said Head. “Our report will summarize key findings from a decade of PIL’s studies of more than 22,000 U.S. students while asking some deeper questions about preparing today’s students to participate in sharing and creating information responsibly as citizens in a changing and challenged world.”

The open access report, due out in mid-December, will shed light on these and other important issues and make recommendations for a way forward in the age of algorithms. This publication will build upon findings from PIL’s 2018 large-scale news engagement study, which Harvard Graduate School of Education and Knight Foundation also funded.

Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots that invests in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Their goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which they believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

Contact: Dr. Alison J. Head, Director, Project Information Literacy, http://projectinfolit.org at alison@projectinfolit.org, 707-800-7590