Serving the Community with Trustworthy Government Information and Data: What Can We Learn from the Public Librarians?

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ABSTRACT

The role of public librarians in mediating and providing access to government information and data becomes more critical than ever in the face of new threats to the trustworthiness of government information and the availability of data. Interviewing reference librarians in four county library systems, the study tries to find out how library and information science (LIS) education can help future public librarians prepare for their roles in mediating government information and data in the global context.

TOPICS

Reference transactions; public libraries; education

The role of public librarians in mediating and providing access to government information and data becomes more critical than ever in the face of new threats to the trustworthiness of government information and the availability of data. Government agencies use their websites to disseminate most official documents and often use social media for information dissemination and communication. While using various informal venues strengthens the potential for public engagement compared to more traditional channels, it also increases the risk for the spread of misleading information. Meanwhile, although the open government data movement is gaining momentum, there are many additional barriers to using government data, namely lack of data literacy, especially for members of poor and marginalized communities. Lack of trust in government, troublesome information that goes viral, and public deficiencies in digital literacy skills are all causes for concern in today's information environment that faces the constant threat of "fake news."

Libraries have the expertise, central community position, and the reputation as information hubs to offer the best possible guidance and training to help patrons discern the trustworthiness of online government information. Librarians serve as de facto information literacy leaders in their communities, so having a good understanding of the current practices of

public librarians in regards to government information and data benefits the profession and LIS students. For this purpose, the research tries to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What roles do public librarians currently play in assisting their communities with trustworthy government information and data? For example, in what situations and how frequently do public librarians need to judge the trustworthiness of government information and data? How do librarians define/judge trustworthiness of government information and data? How do public librarians help their patrons discern trustworthiness? How do public librarians perceive the mediation role between government information and the community they serve?

RQ2: What challenges do public librarians face when providing access and mediating the use of open government data by the community? Including, to what extent do librarians feel confident about their skills and knowledge in helping patrons with government information and data? How has formal LIS education prepared them for the mediator role regarding government information and data?

In answering these research questions, the current study tries to find out how library and information science (LIS) education can help future public librarians prepare for their roles in mediating government information and data in the global context. In the past decade, LIS researchers, exemplified by the Information Policy and Access Center, have conducted several large research projects on the public libraries' services in helping communities and diverse population regarding information (iPAC, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Researchers and educators have demonstrated the essential roles of public libraries in e-government, the feasibility of librarians to serve as the government information access points, and the specific methods for LIS programs to prepare students for the challenges in the e-government information environment (Bertot & Jaeger, 2012; Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger, Bertot, Shuler, & McGilvray, 2011; Snead, 2014). In particular, several authors have discussed the public's trust in public libraries (Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007). Given the increasingly essential trust issues and data literacy issues discussed above, these topics call for renewed attention and in-depth investigation.

The study will use the interview method, conducting semi-structured interviews with public-service librarians, especially reference librarians, working in public libraries. Using a combination of theoretical sampling and convenience sampling strategies, researchers selected library systems in four counties in the southern United States to ensure both commonalities and variations of the study communities. The four counties are in two states; two in mostly urban areas with populations between 450 thousand and 650 thousand people, and their main library branches are both federal deposit libraries. The other two counties include both urban and rural areas with smaller populations of approximately 100 thousand, and their library systems do not serve as federal deposit libraries. Eight to ten reference librarians in each county are being interviewed, each interview lasting 30 to 45 minutes. Recorded interviews will be transcribed for data analysis purposes. In two counties, librarians from multiple library branches are involved. Researchers will employ the qualitative data analysis method, using inductive coding strategy to analyze the interview data, trying to gain a deep understanding of public librarians' roles, skills, and challenges in serving patrons with trustworthy government information. The findings and

results will be used to redesign a course on government information sources and create components of a course on data literacy.

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