What is Information Literacy?

Hello. My name is Philip Smith and I’m here to introduce you to information literacy. Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of this or know what this is all about, so I’m going to give you the basic idea. But before we can understand information literacy, we have to understand what information is. Or at least try. Information is actually a very difficult thing to just define, yet we know what it is because we are flooded with it every day. We seem to live and breathe information all the time, everyday. So let’s start by looking at what it is at this level. We can then see how it works on larger scales and why it is also such an essential element of education, especially in this day and age which is sometimes called the “information age.” Then hopefully you’ll see why being “literate” in or with information is so important.

If you think about what information is at the most basic level it is easy to see how we use it and need it and get it every day, all the time. Here you are in college at the beginning of a new semester; how did you get here? Well you needed certain information; at the simplest, directional level, you needed to know where the class is held, at what time, on what days. Probably something like Webadvisor gave you this information. You’re in this class because, sigh, it is one of those required gen ed classes, something you have to take. This is a piece of information maybe your advisor gave you. What are you doing at LMU? Maybe you live in the area and had relatives who’ve been here and they told you about it. (A lot of our information comes from other people, and we tend to trust this information the most; this is an important point). Or maybe there is a program here you really like and want to get into. You got on the internet and did some searching and found this information from the university’s website. Or maybe a high school guidance counselor suggested LMU and gave you the information that lead to your coming here. Maybe (like me) you don’t know why you’re here and you’re just biding your time, going with the flow – you didn’t get any better information to take you somewhere else. One of the definitions of information is that it is that which reduces uncertainty.¹ Don’t know where your class is, what classes you should take, what to do with your life…? You have a lot of uncertainty; you lack the information it would take to answer these questions.

But school is just one tiny slice of the pie, perhaps one that interests you very little most of the time. Now, I am old and dead inside now, but I can recall, through a glass dimly, what most motivated me as an undergraduate and it was relationships. Actually, this is what interests and motivates us all most of the time. Dealing with others: Friends, lovers, spouses, family, colleagues, rivals, enemies, the great faceless masses who surround and inundate our daily lives. All these relationships are sustained by certain kinds of information, and can be damaged by it. Sometimes this kind of information is called gossip. Now, I’m a librarian, and you probably have only a foggy notion of what I actually do that relies on images and stereotypes from movies and popular culture. You may have noticed I don’t wear a navy blue power suit and have my hair up in a bun and go around telling you to shush! But sometimes people, students, come into my office and confide in me. Just the other day, a young man came to see me and told me he was worried about getting shot. I don’t think he was really going to get shot, but he said something to upset a friend and this friend emotionally responded with a death threat. “What did you say to him?” I asked. “I told him his girlfriend was cheating on him.” And this was something his friend

¹ This definition can be traced to Claude Shannon’s seminal article, “A mathematical theory of communication” Good basic synopses can be found here and here.
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did not want to hear. See, that is how a piece of information can change the constellation of one’s relationships, change a friend into an enemy, a beloved girlfriend into a cheap woman. Information changes our relationships, our lives. What we know and what we share or do not share and how we share it all have a huge impact on us. This young man could have kept this piece of information to himself and perhaps kept a friend, or he could have broken the news more gently and maybe not have to worry about getting shot.

Let’s talk briefly about the history of communication, which really just means what are all the ways or mediums we have of sending and receiving messages. Probably the oldest and simplest is the one we’ve just been discussing: talking. Talking, oral language, is a way to convey a piece of information from one party to another. Without going too far astray we can see how this probably has roots in the deep past, the evolutionary origins of our species. “Look out, there’s a tiger!”, “There is a way to cross this river upstream.” And so on. Good little pieces of information you need to survive out there in the cold, cruel world. So speaking is a remarkably effective way of creating and transmitting important information. For eons, all human knowledge, the wisdom of the ages—all the myths, stories, religions, social arrangements, the very fabric of social and political life—was passed down orally, mouth to mouth, father to son, mother to daughter, generation by generation. A kind of information storage and retrieval system, an oral technology. When we speak of technology, most people probably think of tools, machines, and computers. But if we think of technology as any means of applying knowledge or information about the world to the world, we must consider language itself as a kind of technology, indeed perhaps the primary technology. Applying information about the world to the world changes the world. It changes our shared environment and it changes us, perhaps even, over time, at the genetic level.

So what comes next? As you know, we live in a world full of ways and means to communicate, to send and receive messages, to exchange information, to share information. After the spoken word came the written word. This was quite an ingenious innovation. Moving from the fluid, untraceable medium of the spoken word to the fixed written word had quite an impact on how society’s dealt with and made use of their information. For one thing, it changes how we relate to our own memories. If something is written down, fixed there on paper or papyrus or stone or digitally encrypted on a hard drive in some computer, there is the temptation to forget about it, to let the writing be the memory. When I need to remember it, I’ll look it up again. This was, in fact, one of the earliest critiques of writing, that it would make us forgetful and therefore stupid, propounded by no less an authority than the great Greek philosopher Plato. Certainly there is some truth in this, though one could also argue that writing actually relieves our memories of many trivial bits of information; who needs to remember telephone numbers or all the tiresome dates of battles and treaties or all the scientific names and families and subfamilies of this or that species or all the numbers of the elements of the periodic table. So much of the knowledge ingrained in us in institutions like schools is the stuff of rote memory; but if we can just look it up, then

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2 Kevin Kelly’s recent book, *What Technology Wants* (Viking, 2010) is a good primer for this perspective on technology. Good portal for more info [here](#).
maybe this frees our minds to attend to more important matters. There is much to consider here, but I will leave it at that for now.³

There is another consequence of the written medium: it is traceable. It leaves a record. This means, amongst other things, it can come back to haunt you. Many older people think this is something many younger people do not fully appreciate.⁴ How all the socializing you do in recordable mediums – all the facebooking, chatting, emailing, texting, web-sites you visit – how all of this exists now and potentially forever. When gossiping was just oral, it was easy to forget or deny who said what to whom and when. But as more of it is conducted through these written mediums, more of it is available as recoverable information. Who knows what ramifications or consequences it will have or to what ends and interpretations such information may one day be put. Maybe you’ve heard of stuff like data mining⁵ which is a practice many businesses use to create a profile of consumers based on their online activities. They track all the sites you visit, stuff you buy, people you associate with, things you like and create a profile of you which can be disturbingly accurate in “knowing” or predicting the kinds of products and services you will seek out, the types of behavior you will engage in, and religious and political beliefs and ideologies you will hold. As more and more of our memories are fixed in digitally recorded mediums, the interface, the screen becomes like a mirror and the image of ourselves that begins to form is something we may not have quite anticipated. Have you ever gone back and read old emails or chats or even text messages? They are fragments of yourself plucked from the living flow of experience and laid out now like little specimens on the table ready for dissection. It can be an experience a little like hearing your own voice on tape or seeing yourself in a video. For many people, this is uncomfortable, even a little uncanny and takes some getting used to. The (comfortable, selective) picture you form of yourself from the inside, subjectively, often differs greatly from how you look to others on the outside, objectively. This is what is happening with your digital profile made up of all the informational traces of yourself you leave behind. Unlike our own memories, which are faulty and selective and conditioned in so many ways, digital memories are exact and literal, they never change or decay. Add to this the ease and speed with which messages can be saved, replicated, copied, and transmitted and you can see why you are often coached in professional etiquette courses to never respond to an email when you are angry or emotional. What may seem like a perfectly appropriate and understandable emotional reaction at the time may make you look hysterical and unreasonable later. I heard a guy on the radio the other day who said he keeps a little post-it note taped to the bottom of his monitor that reads, “don’t say anything you don’t want the whole world to hear.”

Hopefully this discussion gives you a sense of how information works and flows through our daily lives. And I should stress, if you haven’t got a sense of this already, how in addition to the permanent traces digital information can leave, the rapidly circulating nature of information via all the tools and gadgets

³ See Nicholas Carr’s article, Is Google Making Us Stupid? For more on this.


⁵ More on data mining here.
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we have available to us these days changes the whole dynamic of information exchange.\(^6\) It goes quickly and you can always go back to it (though you rarely have the time to); rumors spread fast and can be disseminated globally in a way never before possible. If this changes the dynamics of our individual lives, the consequences are even more profound and drastic at the collective level. Rapid and open flow of information through populations has deep effects on how governments and corporations and large institutions, such as universities, function. You see, you can almost think of information as a kind of social enzyme. It speeds up reactions, it catalyzes change. The more information that pours into and out of a situation, any situation, but especially here political dynamics alters the structures and systems of power and social control. Thus it is in social and political struggles, whether we’re talking about the French revolution or the American revolution or all the revolutions you hear about going on even today, information is always a key element. The great pamphleteers of the eighteenth century, such as Thomas Paine, relied on cheap printing and mass circulation of information. Pamphlets were to this earlier age what blogging is to us today\(^7\); a quick and easy way to speak your mind, disseminate a message, and spread information (whether it’s true or biased or not). This is something that always makes the controlling elites, the nobility, the established powers-that-be very nervous. They generally want to restrict the flow of information (or propagate misinformation, \textit{propaganda}) because the less a population knows about what is going on the easier it is to control them. Censorship, which is a kind of control of information, over who knows what, who has access to what information can make or break a movement toward liberation. Without information, you are in the dark, you have a lot of uncertainty and so you tend to just accept the status quo, even if it is repressive and exploits you. With more information easily available, literacy rates shot up, people who before would only have ever seen a book, if at all, in a church as something sacrosanct and not to be touched much less read, suddenly have pamphlets and decrees and manifestos floating all around them. The ideas get into their heads from all this circulating information and soon they start thinking differently, acting differently, in accord with the new information they have absorbed. They get the notion that maybe they can have more of a say in how their own lives are lived, how their government works, how they want to practice their religion, how they want to relate to each other and live their own lives. So in cases like this, information acts as a progressive, liberating force. The more information you have, the more free you can become. Information is like light, the more you have, the more of the landscape or map you can see, the less uncertainty there is, and the better you are able to direct yourself down whatever path it is you want to take. A certain minimum threshold of information is necessary for self determination.

You see this today with a phenomena like Wikileaks. Essentially what you have here is the capability of information technology to overflow all the mechanisms government agencies use to control the secret information about their inner workings. With the internet and other technologies of rapid dissemination of information, it is becoming very difficult to keep anything a secret. So for instance, officials can publically claim that there is no torture going on, that we have no troops in such and such a region, that we are not pressuring this or that nation to do x, but these leaked documents tell another story. You can

\(^6\) See Ray Kurzweil’s \url{TED talk} for more on information-communication speed-up.

\(^7\) Interesting \url{blog post on this connection here}.
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look at this in a lot of different ways. On the one hand you could say it undermines national security, puts our troops in the field at risk. But on the other hand it forces those in power to be accountable for their actions, because there is always the danger of a leak and the truth getting out. In either case, you can see how the flow of information, the easy distribution of it and access to it by the mass populace changes the dynamics of political power.\(^8\)

The point I’ve been trying to emphasize here is that information, whether considered on the personal, individual level or the collective, political level is a constant and very important part of our lives. It is flowing around and through us every day. You may get the impression that more information equals better information, or the more information you have the better your life or state of mind will be, and this may be the case much of the time, but not always. We’re all also familiar with information overload. Talk to the hand. TMI: Too much information. I don’t want to hear it. I didn’t need to know that. Sometimes you are just happy with your little version of how things are and you don’t want any conflicting information coming in and disturbing this. We saw this with the young man in my office who upset his friend by revealing too much information about his girlfriend. Maybe you have a few of those friends on Facebook who feel the need to post about everything little thing they do throughout the day (or maybe you are one of them!) Or when you start researching a topic for a school paper and do a simple Google search and get all sorts of information and it is difficult to sort it out and know where to begin. Often just watching or listening to the news, seeing and hearing about all the misery in the world, the poverty, the wars, the destruction of the environment; you get the impression that world is always just about to end and it’s just too much. Information can be very upsetting. We humans are actually very delicate creatures, we can only sustain so many shocks to the system before we shut down or retreat or start blocking out or denying the intrusion of any new information. This was the thesis of Marshall McLuhan, who was a very influential thinker on media and its impacts on individuals and human societies.\(^9\) He believed our technical abilities which now allow us to quickly convey messages and transmit information have outstripped the ability of our rather fragile nervous systems to deal with the meaning or ramifications of all this information. As result, we go numb. We repress the significance or picture of the world all this information creates in our minds because it’s just too much to deal with. We go numb. We retreat into our little bubbles, we fall back on that set of information which is most comforting and familiar to us and try to keep out anything that will upset us too much. Or we think, this is irrelevant, useless information, stuff I’ll never need to know, so we ignore it. How often do I look out over the sea of student faces and see them ducked down and bathed in the oblivious bluish light of their phones or computers, their eyes glazed over, their jaws slackened, sometimes drooling a little bit. One of the ironies or tragedies of the internet and mobile computing and the access to all the knowledge and information we all have, is that most of us don’t want to or don’t know how to (and don’t want to know how to) use it to actually expand our minds, challenge our preconceptions, really learn something new. We mostly use computers to talk to each other and gossip, this is largely what social networking is; we recreate in virtual space what comes most naturally to us in physical space. We don’t usually really take

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\(^8\) [Good documentary on Wikileaks here](#).

\(^9\) See “[The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis](#)”
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advantage of the full potential for new experiences and learning all this technology makes available to us.

So how can we bring all these considerations to bear on what we are doing here in this classroom today and what we’ll be working on throughout the semester and for the next four years or so of your life? I’ve given you my thoughts on what information is and why I think it’s so important both in the scale of the personal and the collective, so now what is information literacy? Well, one way I see it and would define it is: information literacy is a way of dealing with information overload. A way of dealing with it that is not going numb and shutting down but letting some sensation return to our limbs, being able to face it, to encounter new, potentially upsetting, information with an open, collected, and curious mind. Because we should be careful about what we expose ourselves to—just as you are what you eat, you are also largely the sum of all the information you absorb. But we don’t want to completely isolate ourselves. We want to be cautious, but open. It is literacy because it is a way of knowing how to read; that is, how to analyze and evaluate the information you encounter. Where does it come from? Who created it? Why? How does it fit into a larger context and relate to other ideas on the topic? How can you find more information about it? Get other opinions, viewpoints, or approaches to it? Then, how can you safely integrate this into your already existing view of the topic or the world or life in general? How can you come to actually change your mind or mature in your beliefs and convictions? How can you take what you know and learn and effectively share it with others, to make a positive impact on the world? Information literacy is a way of getting out of your bubble without popping it. And this is (or at least should be) the point of getting an education.