Information Professionals' Roles in the "Post-Truth Era" and Critical Librarianship

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Abstract

This research project proposal discusses the current political moment for the library profession and American society, as well as background literature from a wide range of sources that arguably inform the ALA's recent resolution affirming access to accurate information as a core professional value. The proposed research seeks to create context for library services in a "post-truth" reality and also to assist librarians exploring their roles in terms of critical librarianship. The context can potentially inform practice grounded in librarianship's long tradition of social justice. In order to provide this context, the following research questions with inform the study:

Initial Research Questions for Literature Review

1. What social, political and technological factors contribute to the creation, distribution   and consumption of "fake news"?
2. What is the history of disinformation and misinformation?
3. What are the wider implications of harmful effects of disinformation and misinformation on media, digital and information literacy (IL)?
4. What roles do information professionals play in combating harmful information behaviors?
5. What does promoting literacy in these areas look like in practice?
6. Finally, how can programs promoting IL be measured for effectiveness?

Hypotheses: The qualitative study will point towards important new direct for information

literacy programming and raise awareness of issues of critical librarianship.

Introduction

<u>Truthiness</u>:

The quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true. -Oxford English Dictionary

Also,

The quality of seeming to be true according to one's intuition, opinion, or perception without regard to logic, factual evidence, or the like: the growing trend of truthiness as opposed to truth. - *Dictionary.com*

<u>Post-Truth</u>:

Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. –Oxford English Dictionary

The Oxford English Dictionary named "post-truth" the word of the year for 2016, ten years following the coining of "truthiness" by comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert. Both reflect the political realities of the time; facts in public discourse are personalized and relative, rather than objective, and often weaponized (Keane, 2016). This research proposal asks: What roles do information professionals play in a post-truth reality, particularly in terms of critical librarianship, which contests the possibility of professional neutrality?

On January 24, 2017, the American Library Association released the "Resolution on Access to Accurate Information", affirming that access to accurate information is a core librarianship value and stating that, "…the American Library Association recognizes the contribution of librarianship in informing and educating the general public on critical problems facing society (Policy, A.1.1.). The resolution is not simply a neutral professional value statement; The ALA's resounding defense of libraries as institutions is also an assertion of resistance to the inaccurate information and unreliable language play in fascist dictatorships (Snyder, 2016). The 2016 resolution identifies and defines a serious problem posed by "post-

truth" practices threatening the foundation of democratic society, and asserts public libraries and

information professionals are the solution. The resolution states,

"Whereas inaccurate information, distortions of the truth, deliberate deceptions, excessive limitations on access and the removal or destruction of information in the public domain are anathema to the ethics of librarianship and to the functioning of a healthy democracy; Whereas some governments, organizations, and individuals use disinformation in pursuit of political or economic advantage to thwart the development of an informed citizenry.; Whereas the exponential growth in the use of disinformation and media manipulation constitutes a critical problem facing our society…"

The January 2016 resolution stands in sharp contrast to a later retracted press release

from the same organization dated November 15th, 2016, which announced the ALA was "ready

to work with President –elect Trump…" and to offer libraries' resources and services to

"advance several policy priorities identified by the President- elect." The response from

members constituted a very public outcry and refusal to "collaborate" (Drabinksi 2016, Dudley

2016). Michael Dudley, in an editorial in *Partnership*, notes that "For librarians in particular, our

long-standing professional values (related to diversity, social justice, gender and social equity,

democracy and public education etc.), and those of the incoming…administration…are in

…opposition".

Also in opposition are the two statements released by the ALA. The explanation for the

swift retraction and following precise declaration of values is located in the ascendency of the

profession's embrace of critical librarianship. "Critical librarianship supports the belief that, in

our work as librarians, we should examine and fight attempts at social oppression" (Farkas,

2017). Also of relevance is the acknowledgement by libraries as institutions of the threat of

confusion and chaos resulting from cyberwarfare that deploys "fake news" and inaccurate

information as a weapon in a society confronting deficits in media literacy.

Yale historian Timothy Snyder writes in, *On Tyranny: Twenty lessons from the Twentieth Century*, a twenty- point guideline for resistance to fascism. Of particular relevance in light of this resolution are points 1, 2, 3, and 8. First, do not "obey in advance," second, "defend an institution", third, "recall professional ethics", and finally, number eight, "believe in truth." The connection between these three works, first, the November 2016 ALA press release, second the professional organization's very public reiteration of values following widespread negative reaction from members to the organization's president offering cooperation with the incoming presidential administration, and finally a book length treatise based on the premise that "post-truth is pre-fascism," is the unusual reality ushered in by the unlikely election of Donald J. Trump (Dudley, 2016, Rosenfeld, 2017). This combination of events serves as an illustration of Snyder's guidelines and raises important questions about the role of librarians in a "post-truth era" as defenders of institutions, believers in truth, and professionals with a clear set of ethical guidelines.

Literature Review

The exploration of this topic revealed several themes and sub-themes, including information professionals' heightened awareness of threats posed by "post-truth" and libraries potential to provide digital and information literacy education to address the issue. The following discussion highlights the literature useful for analyzing the topic of information professionals in a post-truth era.

Professional/Industry Literature

Information professionals, aware of the increased need for IL (information literacy) and the serious potential harmful effects and consequences of media literacy deficits, are having conversations about services and programming to address the issue. The problem of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and the potentially serious consequences for information receivers if decisions are based on inaccurate information looms large (Walsh, 2010). Though this is not a new conversation, it has taken on increased urgency. Librarians, such as Charlotte Roh, perceive professional values to be under threat by misinformation and fake news. In *American Libraries Magazine*, Roh argues that, "…propaganda, half-truths, or the framing of stories—has become such a powerful tool in the United States and abroad…major decisions are being influenced by misinformation (2017)." Responses are often located in a critical librarianship perspectives, such as Emily Drabinksi's powerful reaction to the ALA's November press release, "This is not a moment to collaborate. This is a moment to resist" and Michael Dudley's assertion that, "forms of resistance" are "already being practiced in libraries."

Awareness of the technological component of the information environment is evident in Marcus Banks' article for *American Libraries Magazine*, "Fighting Fake News: How Libraries Can Lead the way on Media Literacy." He observes, "falsehoods thrive" on the internet and that the majority of adult American's get their news, "in real time from…social media feeds." He notes that that "continuum" of inaccurate information ranges from totally fake to skewed or biased. On the information receivers' end, Banks sites the Stanford SHEG study, which found that the inability of students to discern bias or evaluate claims of evidence to tell advertising from news is extremely problematic. "One positive outcome of the current furor about fakes news may be that information literacy, for media and other types of content, will finally be recognized as a central skill of the digital age."

Barbara Alvarez (2017) author of "Public Libraries in the Age of Fake News" for *PLA Online*, like so many information professionals, expresses concerns about misinformation, disinformation and potential harmful and divisive effects and asserts that, "… public libraries are… well-positioned to provide resources and trainings about how patrons can assess the information that they encounter. Encouraging patrons to think critically…equips them with the tools they need to be educated readers." Alvarez argues, "Information and media literacy is a bipartisan issue and a functioning democracy demands informed citizens. Public libraries are critical to that effort." Furthermore, she underscores that regarding fake news and its dissemination, the "why" is as important as "how", and that library professionals need to educate themselves on the issue and to provide programming and services to meet patron needs.

Scholarly and Academic Works

Though the above survey of professional discourse suggests a unified front, the November 2016 ALA press release and subsequent controversy exposes tensions around issues of neutrality and more activist positions advocating social justice and critical librarianship. This conflict is based on contradiction of ethical imperatives and professional policies than emphasize neutrality and objectivity in order to serve all the needs of library users, and the longstanding tradition of social justice activism inherent in the project of public libraries.

Professional Neutrality.

Robert Jensen, writing in 2006 about the function of the "myth of the neutral professional" in upholding existing systems of power, argues that it serves to "neutralize professionals" such as academics and intellectuals by requiring they abide by it in order to keep their jobs. This strategy, he argues, keeps professionals in line. Citing Myles Horton and Bishop Desmond Tutu, he argues that neutrality is impossible and that seeking it without reflection is an avoidance of accountability for roles professionals play. Drabinksi's "The ALA Does Not Speak For Me" blog post touches on this when she criticizes libraries as "bastions of whiteness, wedded to ideas of neutrality etc." and notes that this is the "worst of our profession." She is conscious of the power of infrastructures, the roles librarians play in building them, and the power something as basic as classification can have to included or exclude marginalized populations.

Social Justice Roots of Librarianship.

Jaeger, Shilton and Koepfler, authors of, "The Rise of Social Justice as a Guiding Principle in Library and Information Research" point to, "the deep historical roots" of "social justice concerns" in library and information science, citing, "social service activities designed to promote social inclusion and social equity", "leadership roles in the civil rights movement" and

"struggles to protect intellectual privacy, promote freedom of expression, and to challenge censorship (p.2.)." The authors assert that, "questions of information and social justice-including civic participation, digital inclusion, social services, digital literacy, and other community needs—are the defining issues for the present and future of libraries and other cultural heritage institutions (p.5)."

For more on the long tradition in librarianship of social justice as a guiding principle, John Budd's 2008, "Self-examination: The present and future of librarianship" offers information professionals a, "step back" to "examining our telos (our purpose), our ethos, and our world." Budd, a professor at the School of Information Science and Learning Technologies at the University of Missouri, distills the "mission of enhancing and fostering democracy" as a key imperative of libraries in "Public Library Leaders and Changing Society" (2007). In this article, he critiques statements of purpose that lack action plans for implementation, and surveys past professional literature, such as the work of Sidney Ditzion and Jesse Shera that argued for the need of educated citizens to sustain democracy. He clearly opposes the marketplace concept of libraries as just another consumer industry, instead he advocates for libraries to embrace their roles as social justice activists. He writes, "Libraries that serve public (sic) are not businesses in a market, and the mistake of thinking and acting like they are can do long-lasting damage to the conception of the role they ought to play in a democratic society." He accompanies his vision of conceptual changes with detailed plans for action and reform. He argues for "engaged debate in prominent public forums" about the purposes of libraries, "especially the goal of fostering democracy"; "a clear assertion of goals relating to community building" again, with regard to "democratic participation"; policies to promote "egalitarian access to mainstream and alternative

sources of information"; programs that promote egalitarian policies; and incorporating these

ideals into collection development and "access mechanisms".

This position is reflected in the 2013 publication of "Information Literacy and Social

Justice: Radical Professional Praxis" by Lua Greggory and Shana Higgins (eds.) Kenny Garcia

writes in his review that it, "is a collection of essays that nurtures the incorporation of social

justice values and practice in information literacy sessions or courses." The authors Gregory and

Higgins note in the introduction, "the work of Berman, Samek, and others before them have led

to a generation-not a generation based on age-of librarians that see their profession as not neutral

but as politically charged and activist in nature." An essay in the collection by Giroux on

information literacy and neoliberalism critiques "consumer-based notions of agency." Giroux, in

Garcia's analysis, problematizes "neoliberal process" that "transform information literacy into an

individualized act" resulting in, "a conceptual relationship between information and citizen" that

"produces a limited understanding of what an informed citizen really means."

These theoretical points of view inform action, or praxis, in librarian training and in the

field of every day practice. Doherty in "Towards self-reflection in librarianship: What is praxis?"

offers a useful definition of praxis.

"Praxis, in Marxist terms, refers to the process of applying theory through practice to develop
more informed theory and practice, specifically as it relates to social change. The progressive
ideal implied in this is obvious, and is of particular relevance to librarianship."

Doherty argues that the ALA Code of Ethics explicitly states a "goal of social

transformation" and notes that in order for this ideal to be put into practice, it is important that

information professionals reflect on tensions between librarianships' "progressive roots and a

technical rationalist tone" (p.12). When action, reflection, and transformation are connected, Doherty argues, progressive ideals can be realized.

Digital/Information/Media Literacy Trends.

The trend to understand library work in terms of critical librarianship and social transformation encompasses research on the preparedness of librarians to "engage the community in digital literacy and inclusion (Martzoukou & Elliot, 2016) to exploratory research by Fourie & Meyer on the roles played by libraries on approaches "to achieve the object of an informed and educated nation with empowered individuals" by promoting "information literacy, digital literacy and information fluency" (Fourie & Meyer, 2016). Martzoukou and Elliot share Fourie's focus on empowerment of citizens, arguing that, "A necessary condition for enabling the development of DL and for empowering modern citizens to exploit new possibilities offered by technologies is digital inclusion." But they caution that DL and DI are not separate issues, stating that access is a prerequisite for digital literacy. Fourie and Meyer also advocate for a "holistic view of issues" and attention to context when seeking to accomplish progressive, egalitarian goals with programs geared towards IL, DL and IF. Part of this holistic view is reflexivity on the part of librarians' own information behavior, and recognition that the "people" they seek to educate are not monolithic. She asserts,

"Their information behavior, and styles of learning and decision-making, and their worldviews need to be considered since these influence their seeking and use of information and problem solving."

They conclude that "the secret ingredients" for success and sustainability are, "information, collaboration, reflection, and including and reading out to all citizens, and not to expect immediate perfect results."

Understanding the How and Why

The above discussion of discourse in library and information science on issues of social

justice traditions, and theoretical concepts that underpin action and the type of research and

action these components inform are of use to information professionals exploring their roles in a

post truth society. But as Alvarez stated, understanding how and why "fake news" is

disseminated is necessary to public libraries' efforts to combat media literacy deficits. In other

words, solutions are dependent on understanding how misinformation and disinformation spread,

and what causes can be identified and understood for this phenomenon.

Information Behavior, Bubbles and Filters, and the Role of Media.

The Pew research study (noted by Banks) that found the majority of American adults get

their news from social media feeds is problematized further when the feeds are revealed to create

bubbles, filters and reinforce confirmation biases that compromise information and literacy

judgments. Marccatrozzo for instance found that, "personalization techniques", such as

(Facebook algorithms) designed to overcome information overload tailor news and information

to users' interests, resulting in an "over-personalization effect". The "filter bubble", (first

described by Pariser in 2011) creates an, "invisible barrier" to content that challenges worldview.

This bubble is compounded by media driven by economic imperatives that self-selects for

"spectacle" (Pickard, 2016). In other words, as Victor Pickard of the Anneberg School for

Communication at the University of Pennsylvania observes, "the lust for ad revenue lays bare the

toxic hyper-commercialism driving American news media that privileges profits over all other

considerations." Pickard, in "Media Failures in the Age of Trump (2016) identifies three "broad

media failures that combine to imperil democratic society: the news media's extreme commercialism; Facebooks' proliferation of misinformation; and the crisis of newspaper journalism." Pickard offers policies to "address…structural pathologies." He cautions against "monocausal explanations" of fake news for Trump's election, but validates serious concerns about the extraordinary amount of power of "algorithm driven global editor and news gatekeeper" Facebook.

Bubbles are then caused by "over-personalization" of news on social media feeds, and the media that creates or reports the news is driven by profit to emphasize spectacle over substance. Why, once exposed to inaccurate or misleading information, do users believe and share it with others? What explains media and information literacy deficits that contribute to proliferation of false and misleading information, that is demonstrated to have serious consequences and potential for harm?

Information Overload and Limited Attention.

Information overload, or a "heavy flow of information" impacts the "relationship between the quality of an idea and its likelihood to become prevalent at a system level", according to Qui, Oliveira, Shirazi, Flammini and Menzer. The inability to discriminate between high and low quality information is caused, according to their research, by "information overload" and "limited attention". They note that confirmation bias or the tendency to "discard irrelevant information" may have evolved as a cognitive coping mechanism and an "effective strategy to avoid misinformation", but faced with a high-volume of information, it results in a rejection of any information that challenges existing beliefs. This in turn creates "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" in which individuals "cluster". The authors observe, "this may

further lead to polarization; one group may automatically discount ideas from another." This is significant and matters because, "massive digital misinformation has been ranked among the top risks of our society (p4)."

Motivation Literature Suggests Methods for Information Literacy Education

Chen and Sin (2013) studied the motivations of individuals who share misinformation on social media and found by surveying 171 college students, despite valuing truthfulness as "quite important," over "two-thirds…had still shared misinformation." Motivations included, seeking the opinions of others, self-expression, and desire for interaction with others. This suggests that programing and training designed to address this issue should take into account, "attitude change literature…that combines knowledge on information evaluation and sharing with affective messages that target individuals' motivations".

How Misinformation and Disinformation Spread.

Information overload and limited attention interact with individual motivations for sharing misinformation on social media. How then does it spread? Karlova and Fisher (date) support Chen & Sin and Qui et.all, stating simply, "people enjoy sharing information, even when they do not believe it." Internet technology accelerates the spread of misinformation and disinformation. They conclude that misinformation and disinformation are closely linked to information literacy, especially in terms of how people use both cues to credibility and cues to deception to make judgments (Karlova and Fisher)."

Defining Terms: Misinformation and Disinformation.

Misinformation is defined as "inaccurate information" and disinformation as "deceptive information". Both according to Karlova and Fisher, "easily diffuse over time across social groups" via popular social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook). The results or "possible consequences" can be "suspicion, fear, worry, anger, and decisions resulting from these consequences" culminating in a false reality based on inaccurate information. "A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behavior" is widely cited in the scholarly literature. Particularly useful is their conception of misinformation and disinformation as a type of information, and the piece on judgment in this model. They assert, "regardless of whether diffusers are attempting to deceive, receivers make judgments about their believability using cues to credibility and cues to deception." This points to information literacy, defined as the ability, "to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use information" as key to combating the negative phenomenon. Like Fourie who emphasized context, it is important to situate the important elements of judgment, such as cues of credibility and deception, within the individuals' experience, as these cses are highly dependent on situations. An important takeaway of this research is that understanding how cues to credibility and deception work in different social miluex and contexts (in person versus a meme, or other text) is critical to teaching information literacy.

On Intentions: Who Benefits and How

Motivations for sharing misinformation and disinformation and models for how it spread point to the "why" of sharing information behavior and the "how" of diffusions do not speak to the why and how of potentially malicious intentions. Karlova and Fisher observe, "The diffusion

of inaccurate and deceptive information may be motivated by benevolent or antagonistic intents, but the nature or degree of the intent cannot be determined solely by behavior or discourse." For example, vaccine-deniers claim a benevolent intent, to educate and persuade families to reject vaccinations, despite proven scientific evidence against their claims and supporting vaccine use. Climate change deniers claim global warming is a hoax, for various reasons, which can include a suspicion of science, ideology, or economic vested interests. What explains the type of misinformation and disinformation information professionals identify as a specific threat to democracy and professional values?

Disinformation Literature Overview

Fallis, Khaldrov &Pantti, and Aro provide guidance on issues related to disinformation and the threat it poses to an informed citizenry. In the introduction to this paper, the assertion of ALA values grounded in critical librarianship and social justice advocacy of the RAAI (2016) was positioned in opposition to fascism and the role false and inaccurate information plays in undermining democracy and a free society. Don Fallis' "What is Disinformation (2015)" provides valuable mapping of the landscape, identifies it "extremely dangerous" and as a "cause of significant harm." He offers analysis understanding what it is, what specific harm it causes, how it spreads and provides for assistance in "deterring its spread." He asserts that "libraries and other information services are at the forefront of efforts to ensure that people have access to quality information instead." Khaldarova & Pantti provide a case study with "Fake news: The Narrative Battle Over the Ukrainian Conflict." They conclude disinformation disseminated by the Russia as a "strategic narrative" was designed as weaponized information in service of state goals. Finally, Jessika Arro, a Finnish investigative journalist, details how, "the Kremlin sees the

mass media as a 'weapon', and unpacks the serious chilling ramifications on stifled expression of dissenting views.

Disinformation Definition

Fallis defines disinformation as, "information that has the function of misleading." Harmful effects include "eroding trust and thereby inhibiting our ability to effectively share information with one another." Disinformation can take the form of false advertising, business related misleading information, government propaganda, photographs altered with the intention to mislead, falsified documents and inaccurate maps (p.401). He notes that all of these classic forms of disinformation are easily accomplished with modern technology. Disinformation is a type of information that "represents some part of the world being a certain way", and can incorporate both true and false contexts and information. It is highly "likely to create false beliefs." It must not be confused with satire or actual mistakes; awareness of this distinction enables cue detection, and discernment of the intention to mislead.

Disinformation in Action: Case Studies.

Kaldarova and Pantti (2016) analyze Russia's deployment of information warfare in the Ukrainian conflict by examining "narratives of fake news" on Russia's state television, Channel One, concluding that "fabricated stores" are "projections of Russia's strategic narratives". They also explore Ukrainian pushback in the form of the website Stopfake.org, a "fact-checking"… "counter" to the Russian narrative". Strategic narratives are defined as a, "tool for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences." They assert, "fake news often takes the form of propaganda

entertainment (kompromat), which is a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context (p.3)." Ukrainian pushback against Russian strategic narratives designed to draw emotions based on national identity derived from the struggle against fascists in World War II, must contest imagery conflating and associating the Ukrainian government and military with "fascists" and "executioners" (a term that connotes Nazi atrocities), and anti-Western Soviet sentiments that paint the west as immoral in contrast to the moral traditionalism of Russia. The intent of these narratives is to undermine confidence in Ukrainian independence and promote pro-Russian views.

Their examination of Stopfake.org to combat this narrative offers a useful blueprint for digital literacy education efforts. An important takeaway from this piece is their conclusion that, "fabricated and bizarre news reports circulating widely on the internet can be understood as agitation propaganda that is designed to provoke an effective response from the public." Another important observation about the "power of strategic narratives" is that it is credibility or rationality are not necessary, rather they, "appeal to emotions" and "blur the board between what is real and what is not." The most striking conclusion is that the purpose of agitation propaganda's resulting confusion readies audiences for the preferred message of the state.

"The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools" by Jessikka Aro, a Finnish investigative journalist, details her experience investigating Russian efforts to manipulate media and the "public debate" through organized, "trolling, hacking and other oppression techniques" in order to create a pro-Russian environment in Finland and silence dissenting voices who opposed Russian actions in the Ukraine. The author defines information

warfare as, "a state-conducted, strategic series of information and psychological operations that influences the target's opinions, attitudes and actions in order to support the political goals of the state's leaders (p.122)." Through interviews, investigative reporting and observations, as well as her own experience of becoming a target of a smear campaign, she concludes the impact is to silence and confuse people (p124). She observes that it is an inexpensive propaganda tool, and like a virus that replicates itself automatically, misinformation, disinformation and propaganda spreads organically online. Her analysis of disinformation "tailor-made" to specific audiences (visual propaganda, or memes for younger, more visually oriented targets, brainwashing methods for individuals who desire the appearance of rational dialogue, efforts aimed at community oriented internet users etc.) is shockingly familiar to Americans, who as of this writing have definitely been targeted by Russian intelligence operations to sway the election.

Research Problem

What then, is the role of information professionals in the "post-truth" era in terms of critical librarianship? Meredith Farkas, ("Never Neutral: Critical Librarianship and Technology" in the January/February 2017 issue of *American Libraries Magazine*) writes that critical librarianship takes the position that, "neutrality is not only unachievable, it is harmful to oppressed groups in our society" (Farkas, 2017). Given recent current events in which public trust in the media is now being overtly undermined by the government, and information literacy is crucial in order for an informed citizenry to participate fully in a democracy, exploring the role of librarians is a salient issue. By surveying librarians on perceptions of the problem of information behavior and misinformation and its previously stated negative implications, and by

mapping programming and services aimed at information literacy education, this study will seek to better understand how theory and practice are actually converging.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

General:

- What are the implications for a free society when information trust worthiness of is undermined? For example: Promoting alternative facts, suggesting something is unknowable, or that evidence does not exist for a particular argument, or asserting that science is false, or news is fake?

- What can history suggest? What can be learned from totalitarians regimes, authoritarians? What can be learned about this topic from Nazi and communist propaganda? What role did information professionals play in those scenarios?

- What are critical librarianship practices? What does it look like in action?

- Are librarians aware of and in the process of negotiating tensions between professional neutrality and critical librarianship's advocating of social justice action?

Specific:

- What do librarians actually perceive their roles to be in this information environment and political moment?

- Do they embrace critical librarianship and perceive libraries as the solution to the stated problem?

- What are public libraries doing in terms of programming and information literacy

  education efforts?

- How can these be measured?

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