Extended Q&A with Tom Bober

Do you talk to your students on which informational websites are legitimate? Like prioritize .gov, .edu, .org. Avoid .com?

This is one area that we used to push quite heavily but guidance from some of the leaders in the field, and some of the voices from the Stanford History Education Group that I mentioned yesterday come to mind, are strongly suggesting we move away from that. I have to agree with their suggestions. There are aspects of this general line of guidance that don't hold true.

For example, anyone can go online and purchase a .org url. Another is that there are many examples of personal opinions are often posted on personal webspace on a .edu account. And while there are ways to determine that those aren't the official pages of the university by examining the url, the nature of browsing doesn't always make that apparent to the information consumer, especially when taking into account the type of device they're searching from. There are others that are overstatements. While anything can be a .com, there are hundreds of very reliable sources on the web with a .com.

So the suggestion of bringing a healthy skepticism into the initial reading of information, having a solid skill of determining fact from opinion, and especially utilizing a lateral reading strategy can serve learners better to determine the reliability of a specific website beyond the web address.

Could there be certain areas where looking at a url could confirm or inform those findings? Certainly; but I don't believe it should be a starting point in determining the reliability of a source.

How do you address confirmation bias with students, if at all?

We certainly do! And I'm sorry that didn't make it into the webinar. A few quick areas that speak to confirmation bias include:

- Those initial conversations around the news that young learners consume and where they consume it from can start to reveal examples of confirmation bias and provide an entry point to introduce and define the term.

- Work around news aggregators that we spoke about during the webinar give a solid example of looking for types of news and perspectives within that news.

- I think the Circle of Viewpoints strategy, especially when used regularly, reveals the fact that there are multiple perspectives when it comes to reacting to a news story (and other information). If terms and definitions for confirmation bias are already introduced prior to this, there is a direct connection to identify possible bias in the news we are seeking out and how we are reacting to that news.

- Finally, reading laterally, if done thoroughly, can push against confirmation bias by providing different angles to the reporting on one event. I love the idea of reading laterally but also collaboratively so that teens and tweens are talking to each other about the news stories they are encountering and how they react to those stories.

Have you had any experiences where a student or parent/guardian believes that memes are a reliable source of news? How did you handle that?

I have certainly had students come in with this belief. Turning back to that definition from the webinar shows that it would not qualify as news according to that definition.

What that person may be responding to is that a meme can provide information and may be information that we as consumers don't know about. That is certainly true. And so then we can ask what the purpose of the meme is. In that case, I would say that it introduces us to information. But we (all news and information consumers) have responsibilities beyond that.

The first is to identify what it is. Another would be to ask questions about it, especially when it is information new to us. And then we would want to seek out information to answer those questions. And that is where true news comes in because it can inform us and answer those questions. In another scenario, if a news consumer already has a solid understanding of the news event from news sources and then encounters a meme, then after identifying its purpose, the news consumer may want to identify the opinion/perspective that is being shared through the meme.

We certainly have students in middle and high school creating their own memes as part of their learning. (I've seen it more around historical events or figures and not necessarily around current news topics/events.) Going through that type of exercise shows that the purpose around a meme is often to share a perspective or opinion along with possibly entertaining. And while those may be around a recent event, it does not hold up to the primary objective of informing the individuals that see/read it.