

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.



THINK-TANK



Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum



Drinking from a firehose

Back in the days before the internet and social media, we had newspapers, radio and television as the primary means of accessing news and informed commentary about things and current events in our community and the rest of the world. The reports and programs that were produced were broadcast and shared with the public on a fixed schedule and, in hindsight, were relatively few in number from well-known sources, so that broad segments of the public would regularly hear the same report or program, and that shared experience would allow for debate and discussion from a common knowledge base.

Those days are behind us, at least in places where people have the right and the ability to access information. Now, our every interaction with the internet and social media is tracked and analysed by others to guide our access to information based on our historical preferences. We

can also access information whenever we want from a seemingly infinite number of sources. That sounds like a good thing but we are learning that maybe it's too much of a good thing. Drinking from a firehose requires some skill if you are to get enough water to slake your thirst and still remain dry, uninjured and standing.

The internet has become an indispensable resource and repository of information for many of us, brilliant for the instant dissemination of information and many people who previously did not have access to knowledge through libraries, research publications, schools, encyclopedias (remember those?!), expert commentary and newspapers are now able to do so. But the information both deposited in, and disseminated by, the internet is generally not curated consistently, meaning that it is not checked for veracity or reliability so the internet is a 'user beware' place. This is also the case with social media where individual opinions may be shared and disseminated throughout their user

communities almost instantaneously without any balance or basis in verified fact. In today's world, we need to be information literate.

So, what does it mean to be information literate? Earlier this year in April, the Information Literacy Group committee (ILG) of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) published an updated definition.

"Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society."

How does this work when we are constantly being bombarded with information in tiny bits? Can we make sense of these bits and gain a true understanding of complex subjects? Can we figure out what is real and what is fake? What is the role of our educational institutions, government, companies, society and media? How has the rapid penetration of social media to supplant more traditional information sources like newspapers, radio and television impacted our critical thinking skills and attention

spans? What do parents need to do to help their children or maybe it's the other way around? What personal responsibility do we each have as individuals to be information literate?

An important clue might be found in an earlier statement. According to the 2005 UNESCO Alexandria Proclamation, information literacy is an important contributor to democratic, inclusive, participatory societies:

"Information literacy lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion in all nations."

Lifelong learning requires us to be more active and discerning in our access to, consumption and use of information. We can also learn by allowing ourselves to be more curious and by training ourselves to ask the right questions. For example, we regularly hear about 'fake news' today. This issue is not new, as people have through the centuries been subjected to similar content that many would label as

'propaganda' from non-trusted, or known-to-be-biased, entities. The difference today is that there are many more sources of information and the speed and reach of dissemination makes it difficult if not impossible for counter-arguments and actual facts to be presented in a timely way. In this environment, each of us has a greater responsibility as individuals to question the information we consume before we rely on it or disseminate it further.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has produced a simple infographic based on the work done by FactCheck.org to help people spot fake news. Is there a way to shortcut this laborious process of verification?

The short answer is "no", unless you are willing to trust an information source. But even trusted information sources, like our most trusted friends, can make mistakes and errors in judgement so it makes sense to ask questions when you come across information that doesn't seem to make sense. And sometimes not making sense is deliberate so taking in the entire context is important too; this approach would help

a new user understand well-known and respected sources that specialize in satire like TheOnion.com that, on a casual first glance, looks very much like a 'real' news website. For a contrasting example, one might take a look at InfoWars.com, a website controlled by a well-known conspiracy theorist, that attracts more monthly views than The Economist and Newsweek.

What about the providers and disseminators of information? Do they have responsibilities as well? Is calling for more transparency enough? In many specialized areas, like the listed company and investment advisor space, there are specific rules that have legal consequences and demand compliance. In some political and public policy arenas, it appears that reasoned, civil discourse has largely been replaced by tweets and short media sound bites devoid of much needed context.

Social media is influencing a rapidly-growing audience that may be unaware of where the shared information comes from. For example, in April 2018, the Pew Research Center published a report on political discourse and Twitter activity. Amongst the findings: 66% of tweets that directed users to links for popular news and current events websites were made by accounts with characteristics of suspected automated 'bots'; the 500 most active suspected 'bot' accounts were responsible for 22% of the tweets compared to the 500 most active human accounts that were only responsible for 6% of the tweets.

Who is controlling the 'bots' and what are the implications for our societies? Does Jersey have an opportunity to take deliberate steps to become more information literate? Can we, the actual people who live and work in Jersey, create an environment that allows for more effective public engagement and debate? Can we define the common ground for people with different and disparate views to come together, understand the underlying facts and devise solutions together? Learning to drink from a firehose might be a good start!

What do you think? Get in touch, participate and share your views with us at contact@jerseypolicyforum.org.