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# Literacy is More than Books

## Muslims should take the lead in promoting public information literacy

### BY JUSTIN PARROTT

AT SOME POINT IN HUMAN HISTORY, the general populations of developing societies deemed it necessary to ensure mass literacy because, due to progress, reading and writing could no longer be considered luxuries to be enjoyed only by the wealthy and specialized elites or scribes. Instead, a given society's rapid progression from milestone to milestone and its subsequent growing dependence upon increasingly complicated forms of nonverbal communication (e.g., letters, numbers and symbols) transformed public literacy into a matter of its survival.

Today we, both as human beings and particularly as Muslim communities, are facing another defining moment that will determine whether our species will flourish or decline: *information literacy*. This relatively new competency involves not only being able to read and write proficiently, but also being able to accurately process and synthesize enormous amounts of online information

in a way that leads us to the truth of things as they exist in reality.

Information literacy is the set of skills required to discover, evaluate, interpret and use information properly, effectively and ethically. These skills are explicitly taught to students by research librarians, professors and journalists in institutions of higher education. However, it is abundantly clear that it's time to transfer these skills from colleges, universities and editorial rooms to the population at large.

The online environment has become so polluted that a deep cynicism and sense of despair exists among significant sections of the citizenry, as if finding the truth amidst all of the digital noise is impossible. Society can no longer afford to ignore the tidal waves of erroneous information driving public behavior and even government policies. In a world of widespread misinformation on the Internet, what some analysts have dubbed our "post-truth" era, information

literacy could possibly be this century's most important human competency.

Achieving literacy in terms of accurate information and its related technologies is essential to the Muslim community's progress for several reasons. The copious amounts of misinformation on the Internet and in social media can mislead us or cause us to mislead others. We should be aware that as the web is a literal minefield of falsehoods, healthy skepticism is warranted. Stories recently spread over Facebook and Twitter during this political season were completely baseless and deliberately so, outright lies that one might call "fake news."

Such reports distort people's perception of reality and, since many viral stories are driven by powerful emotions like anger and disgust, can provoke unwarranted action, hatred and even violence against today's out-groups — immigrants, foreigners, ideological opponents and so on. Indeed, many Muslims are shaken in their faith not because of anything flawed in mainstream Islamic teachings, but rather because they have been

exposed to egregious misrepresentations of Islam and Muslim communities, sometimes by wayward Muslims themselves.

Moreover, humanity as a whole faces enormous global challenges, ranging from political and economic instability to climate change and resource mismanagement. Without a critical mass of citizens who can sift reliable information from everything posted online, we cannot reach a consensus on how to approach these challenges or even agree that they actually exist. Malignant conspiracy theories are invented, evolve and metastasize to new online spaces every day, sometimes asserting wild allegations based on flimsy or non-existent evidence, and at other times "denying" what can be firmly established by literal mountains of proof. For example, how can we possibly redirect the dangerous course of Earth's climate if very large groups of people, along with the politicians they are supposed to hold accountable, either cannot or refuse to distinguish hard scientific evidence from unfounded speculation?

Thankfully, not everything is doom and gloom for us. Information literacy skills are not terribly difficult to learn, understand and teach, for it is simply a matter of mainstreaming the intellectual habits, tools and techniques now confined to academia and journalism. Muslims can — and should — take the lead in educating our communities and people in general about the specific mechanics of determining truth within the ocean of information overload. In fact, our historic religious tradition contains key concepts that both preceded and foreshadowed what has become modern information literacy.

The American Library Association, which endorses a full framework for teaching information literacy to university students, has uploaded the complete set of standards on its website (www.ala.org). For our purposes, the ideas that we need to advocate for, and are entirely consistent with our religion, can be boiled down to three: lifelong learning (having a disposition for truth and fact-finding), information authority (recognizing credibility and expertise) and roots and branches (learning topics systematically).

The most important aspect in this regard is to develop an identity as a lifelong learner of all knowledge that is beneficial. Imam Malik stated: "It is not befitting for anyone with knowledge to give up learning" ("Jami' Bayan al-'Ilm wa Fadlih," vol. 1, hadith no. 401; Dar al-Fikr, 1990). Many of our righteous predecessors expressed a similar sentiment.

In other words, we ought to genuinely care about continually finding, understanding and acting upon the truth of whatever issue is at hand, not just cherry-picking facts to suit our preferred narrative.

Life-long learning involves nurturing a

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sense of intellectual humility and a willingness to honestly discuss with those who disagree with us in pursuit of the common goal of arriving at the objective truth. Our predecessors' attitude can be summed up as: "Our way is correct, but could be mistaken. Their way is mistaken, but could be correct" (Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, "al-Fatawa al-Kubra al-Fiqhiyah," 4/313; Turath for Solutions, 2013). This must be our stance regarding all secondary religious topics and worldly issues, in which there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. The mark of a true scholar is a readiness to change one's opinion in light of better evidence and sounder arguments.

Having developed positive character traits conducive to acquiring information literacy, the next step is to learn how to identify credibility and expertise. Every field of knowledge has leading scholars, experts and associations who are the "go-to" resources due to their recognized *authority* in their fields. However, both leading scholars and organizations sometimes make mistakes because, of course, they are not infallible. But experts are far more likely to be correct than laypeople and, even if they are wrong on some issues, their mistakes are more likely to be pointed out in appropriate public forums by their peers. They are, after all, embedded in communities of learning that keep them in check.

Internet resources should be critically evaluated in the same way we look at a scholar's work. When confronted with dubious claims on a website, we should ask ourselves who authored this content, what is his/her agenda, what are his/her credentials and biases, what is the opposing argument and evidence, and can this claim be independently verified? The

habit of examining authors and websites critically and fairly in this fashion will eventually equip us to detect fake news, bogus allegations and conspiratorial nonsense.

Evaluating sources should be accompanied by systematic learning, what our predecessors called the method of "roots" (*usul*) and "branches" (*furu'*). Every topic to be studied has primary concepts (roots) that must be understood before one can move on to secondary issues (branches). Primary concepts are usually found in standard reference materials like encyclopedias, primers and introductory literature. It takes a measure of intellectual humility to acknowledge that we may not know enough about a topic to hold a reasonable opinion about it, in which case we have to study its primary concepts before engaging with its secondary issues. Thus we should follow the example of our predecessors, who fully internalized Islam's basics before approaching the higher scholarly disciplines.

So far, we have only touched on the very tip of the iceberg that is information literacy and its myriad of practical applications to our personal, professional and digital lives. Our community's imams, scholars and leaders would do well to read up on the fundamentals of information literacy and reflect upon its connections to the Prophet's teachings and traditional Islamic learning. These ideas can be easily integrated into sermons, lectures and speeches given in our mosques, during conferences and elsewhere in daily life, right alongside the Quran, the Sunnah and the words of our predecessors for the benefit of humanity in general. In this way, we have the potential to take the lead in teaching people what they absolutely need to know to safeguard a prosperous future for humanity. The fate of generations unborn is hanging in the balance. *ih*

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