

Dawn Stahura

ACT UP for evaluating sources

Pushing against privilege

Like most librarians, I teach one-shot instruction sessions for numerous departments across campus on myriad topics. Fortunately, most faculty give me the entire class period to go over research techniques and evaluating sources. Prior to 2017, my discussion around evaluating sources happened towards the end of the class period, after I had demoed a few databases and searched the library catalog. This worked until it didn't anymore. After the 2017 presidential inauguration, faculty and students returned to a more complex classroom climate, accentuated by tension, fear, and sadness.

Because of this new climate, I noticed a change in instruction requests. For the first time, faculty were asking me to specifically mention how to spot fake news. After a few of these sessions, word got out and suddenly faculty were requesting whole sessions on evaluating sources and fake news. With the focus on (mis)information, I felt it was finally time to blend evaluating sources with social justice.

Since 2010, I have used a variation of the CRAAP method. While it is effective, I needed a different approach, a way to connect students with their research in a socially just way. A method that was cognizant of our current political climate, while drawing attention to systemic oppression and privilege in research and publishing. I thought about how social justice movements evolve over time, often fading from the public eye but not from the cause. What if I could create a method that not only effectively evaluated sources, but also brought to the forefront a social movement from the past, reinforcing that change takes time?

It was at this intersection that I thought of

ACT UP. By definition, ACT UP means to act in a way that is different from "normal"; the normal established by patriarchy and the systemic oppression of marginalized groups. To ACT UP is to actively engage in dismantling oppression of people of color and acting upwards to create a more socially just system. But ACT UP is not just an easy to remember acronym. The AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP) is an advocacy group that formed in 1987 during the AIDS crisis. While most young students are unaware of the work this group is still doing, using the acronym ACT UP provides an opportunity to tie evaluating sources with grassroots activism.

Each instruction session begins with student-led dialogue. I ask students to candidly talk about how they do research, not just for academia, but for their personal lives, as well. I want to know where they turn for information, why they keep returning to those resources, and how they evaluate what they find there.

After some database searching, I ask students what purpose subject headings serve. Most students mention using them to find other relevant articles. In this way, subject headings are a bridge between what the students are saying and what the database/Internet is saying. Students know what they want to find and struggle getting the database/Internet to understand their need. Compounding this difficulty are semantics and inherent systemic

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oppressions existing within our classification systems. Most students are shocked when I talk about classification systems, controlled vocabularies, and nonexistent subject terms, such as *white privilege*, *gender binary*, and *sexual fluidity*. Highlighting this allows for the lightbulb moment when students realize that semantics matter, that perhaps the tools are broken, not their research skills. This is where research struggles are validated and become a place of resistance.

Beyond this, we have to talk about privilege in publishing and the implications it has on what articles we find in library resources. While most students are not surprised to find that the majority of authors are White men, they are surprised to learn that the majority of peer reviewers are White, as well. It never occurred to students to think about who the peer reviewers are and how this might prevent certain folks from getting published. The same privilege that awards folks dominant narratives also prevents marginalized scholars from ever reaching the

same publishing platform. Knowing about the privilege in publishing presents the possibility of students using alternative sources in their academic research. It is important because citation counts matter. If students never include marginalized voices into their research, the same White voices will continue to get cited, perpetuating White privilege. One way students can disrupt this cycle is by bringing in new voices, changing the research landscape one citation at a time.

Academic research is not the only reason students search for information. With so much reliance on social media, we quickly see how easy false information can go viral. Many of us share information online without ever fact-checking or verifying the information. This is especially true if the information is coming from someone we trust. But we have to do better. We all have a social responsibility to others who may be looking to us for information. We have a social responsibility to evaluate information before we retweet or repost. Despite how harmless reposting information may seem, it indicates our stamp of approval that the information is accurate and reliable. Fake news and misinformation have very real consequences, and I hope that by using the ACT UP method, students will be more socially responsible with their information.

Poking holes in scholarly resources might be challenging, but ACT UP is more about shifting the research paradigm to make room for other voices. Talking openly to students about publishing privilege and systemic oppressions in classification systems, provides them with skills to make more informed decisions throughout their research. By advocating for students to ACT UP, they recognize the importance of discerning fact from fiction and how these research skills allow them to be more socially just in all facets of their lives. After all, research in its purest form is an act of resistance. It's my job as a librarian to teach them how.

The ACT UP Method¹

A - author. Who wrote the resource? Who are they? Background information matters.

C - currency. When was this resource written? When was it published? Does this resource fit into the currency of your topic?

T - truth. How accurate is this information? Can you verify any of the claims in other sources? Are there typos and spelling mistakes?

U - unbiased. Is the information presented to sway the audience to a particular point of view? Resources unless otherwise stated should be impartial.

P - privilege. Check the privilege of the author(s). Are they the only folks who might write or publish on this topic? Who is missing in this conversation? Critically evaluate the subject terms associated with each resource you found. How are they described? What are the inherent biases?

Note

1. Dawn Stahura, "ACT UP: Evaluating Sources," accessed March 22, 2018, <https://goo.gl/9G1KTH>. *z*