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Playing with Paywalls: Information Literacy in Theory and Practice

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Playing with Paywalls: Information Literacy in Theory and Practice

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Overview

Increasingly, online publishers and distributors of information – news sites, popular magazines, professional blogs – have implemented paywalls to limit the number of articles to which the public has free access. This has traditionally been true for scholarly sources and databases, and prompts deep questions about information gatekeeping and access to knowledge. How do students respond when confronted with a paywall? What are their thoughts about the limiting of “free” content available online?

In this activity, students are invited to explore the implications of the choices that information distributors are making every day. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many national newspapers did not apply a paywall to Coronavirus related content. For example, *The Washington Post* made all COVID-19 related content free to the general public, “so that all readers have access to this important information about the coronavirus pandemic” (“Coronavirus”). At the same time, articles that explore other issues of significant and urgent national importance such as voter suppression and racism often still require a subscription for access.

The goal of this activity is to engage students both in theory and in practice of key information literacy skills. To this end, students will identify and examine information literacy strategies in the first part of the activity, and then to analyze and support their own application of information literacy in the digital age. Here specifically, this activity asks students to think critically about the value of information and access to information in the context of “normal” and emergency scenarios. In essence, what truly is the

value of information? And what do our decisions reveal about our values?

This activity has much room for flexibility and can be adapted as needed by instructors to emphasize key aspects of information literacy.

Time Commitment

60-75 minutes

Materials

Both instructor and students will individually need a computer/tablet/phone/device with internet access.

Activity Process

- For the first part of this assignment, students will individually attempt to find five recent online articles on a particular issue/topic from *The Washington Post* (or any other nationally circulated trustworthy online news source, which has a paywall—most do, though be sure to confirm). Students will likely use Google or *The Washington Post* website to search, and so will be confronted with a paywall after opening a few articles. Students will have to make decisions about how they respond to this challenge. Did they open a private browsing window to bypass the “leaky” paywall? If so, how did they know to do that? Did they have ethical concerns about circumnavigating a paywall? What other approaches did they take? Did some students simply stop searching once they hit a wall? Did they attempt to find information through other sources, perhaps less reliable ones? Did some students attempt to use their university library access to find articles? What do they think about the existence of paywalls? Have their past experience with paywalls shaped their expectations?

Does the type of technology they are using to access information inform the choices they make? Have students reflect critically and metacognitively on their discoveries, actions, and implications of being confronted with a paywall.

- Next, present students with the following role-play scenario: the students are on the editorial board of an online newspaper with national readership during the COVID-19 crisis (this can be substituted with a zombie apocalypse, natural disasters, alternate epidemic, cybergeddon, etc. Conversely, the instructor can choose a non-crisis focus that suits their specific class). There are usually nine sections the newspaper runs, but with the pandemic they have added an emergency crisis section. The sections are: Politics, Technology, World, Sports, Business, Arts & Entertainment, Health, National, Weather, and Crisis. In order to stay solvent, the newspaper must keep a minimum of eight sections behind a paywall. Consider though: the more sections that are paywalled, the more expert journalists the newspaper can hire to provide trustworthy content; on the other hand, the fewer sections paywalled, the fewer journalists the paper can hire and the quality of the content may decrease. What sections, if any, do students choose to provide for “free”? What is their reasoning? What factors are at play?
- Finally, complicate the previous scenario with some variations. What if their newspaper was the only source of information left? How might their decisions change if it was a local paper instead of national? What if another news source known for amplifying disinformation became the most popular site? What if their paper made all access free? Or kept everything paywalled?
- To wrap up the activity, ask students to reflect on the significance of information. How does the necessity of paywalls complicate the value and life cycle of information?

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain a deeper understanding of information literacy through exploring increasingly complex issues surrounding access to knowledge
- Think critically about the value and life cycle of information
- Simulate a hypothetical scenario to assess the ethics and reality of information production and distribution
- Evaluate their own conclusions about what ethical information sharing should look like

Learning Accommodations

- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.
- Student agency in selecting type/format of technology used to research articles should be emphasized in activity description.

Works Cited

“Coronavirus.” *The Washington Post*, 2020,
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/>.