Teaching Information Literacy

Ratna Chandrasekhar
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Ashton Carter, the Coordinator of the Preventive Defense Project at Harvard, points out the difficulty of specifying our goals in this war. He asks, Is fighting terrorism to be considered in the same vein as conventional war? Not exactly, we do not work against nations, through treaties, with identified combatants. Is fighting terrorism like fighting crime? Again, this is not a good match; there is much more to this fight than finding perpetrators and bringing them into the criminal justice system. The war ahead may be closer to disaster response and recovery; that was the most important part of reestablishing New York after the World Trade Center attacks, but we wouldn’t want to stop there. The fact is, the war against terrorism falls into all three policy areas. But all three focus have distinct political and bureaucratic cultures. The intent of the Department of Homeland Security is to give a high degree of command and control when the policy focus needs to change, from crime prevention to disaster recovery to emergency preparedness. This wouldn’t be possible under a system where all of the terror-fighting agencies were able to retain their own identity. See Table 2 for a summary of the contrast between the “czar” approach used in the War on Drugs and the consolidated approach toward domestic organization in the war against terrorism.

CONCLUSION: HAVE A LITTLE FAITH?

“At the end of the day, do [federal workers] serve the broader interest of homeland security where they are? Or is it conceivable that they should be cross-trained, or should they be moved into a different role? Who knows? We just don’t know.”

—Tom Ridge, 10 July 2002

Is Tom Ridge’s comment reassuring, or discouraging? Some may be frightened that even he doesn’t know the answers. I see it differently: Ridge cannot predict the future, and we should respect his honesty in this regard. Further, we should be pleased that the government is trying different options, even ones that buck current trends and philosophy on organizational improvement. This essay does not predict success or failure in the war on terrorism, but it does point toward the strong potential that our governmental leadership and organizations are learning from the recent past. The fighting in Afghanistan was dramatically different from the successful war effort in “Desert Storm” back in 1991, or the failed one in Mogadishu in 1993. We need to give credit to our leaders that they got it right, at least late in 2001, even if there are future unforeseen problems in Afghanistan in months or years to come. If the reorganization underlying the Department of Homeland Security works through a failure, at least it won’t be a repetition of the most comparable recent failure, in the manner of our organization to fight the War on Drugs. That is the main lesson. We can’t predict the future, but we can and truly are learning from the past.

—Brendan Burke is Assistant Professor of Political Science

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Aspect</th>
<th>War on Drugs</th>
<th>Domestic War on Terrorism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programmatic Representation</td>
<td>Wide; many agencies have a stake in this fight</td>
<td>Wider; terrorism is an even more varied and widespread threat than drug violence, sales, and use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordination of effort</td>
<td>Limited; agencies remain independent but are organized as members of a “team”</td>
<td>Strong, at least in theory, all independent agencies and programs serve the same chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Organizational Structure</td>
<td>Matrix, with the ability to treat regional problems or functional problems, under the guidance of a “czar”</td>
<td>Hierarchy, with all resources and agencies operating under the orders of the Secretary of Homeland Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency Autonomy</td>
<td>Maintained relatively intact; only in certain situations and under specific circumstances does an agency’s broad mission need to focus on the shared problem</td>
<td>Significantly reduced; the mission of agencies and programs within the Department is made more narrow and focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Advantage</td>
<td>The matrix is well equipped to respond to a changing external environment, in theory, as long as the “czar” has real coordinating power</td>
<td>The hierarchical agency should be able to reduce internal dissent among separate agencies and programs, as long as the resources are not too diverse and diffuse</td>
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</table>

As academic librarians, my colleagues and I at the Maxwell Library are continually at work developing new instructional strategies to meet the needs of Bridgewater students and faculty. The Internet has transformed the way research is conducted and made finding information a great deal easier. But it has created challenges too. The sheer quantity of information available can be bewildering. It’s common for a student researcher to enter her topic in a search engine only to discover, a few seconds later, several thousand ‘hits’ or matches. How can she limit this topic to make it more manageable? Even more critical is the need to evaluate and analyze each ‘hit’ or ‘match’ and determine if it is related to her topic. How does the user determine whether a particular source is reliable or prejudiced, a recognized authority on his subject or a 7th grader? Library users must be aware of the significant differences between general internet searches, which provide no easy way to distinguish between the trivial and the significant, and the databases, which facilitate academic pursuits.

Teaching Information Literacy

by Ratna Chandrasekhar

If a modern Rip Van Winkle, a person who last visited a library 20 years ago, should suddenly awake, he or she would be in for a shock. Gone are the bulky wooden structures containing hundreds of drawers, the catalogs which once held a separate card for each book in the library’s collection. Instead, entering the library, Rip would see banks of computers, providing access to a vast quantity of information from books, journals, and newspapers as well as from libraries, websites and databases around the world. Today, information can be retrieved far more quickly and efficiently than ever before. Yet this marvelous technology has brought with it new problems and challenges for students and teachers.

As academic librarians, my colleagues and I at the Maxwell Library are continually at work developing new instructional strategies to meet the needs of Bridgewater students and faculty. The Internet has transformed the way research is conducted and made finding information a great deal easier. But it has created challenges too. The sheer quantity of information available can be bewildering. It’s common for a student researcher to enter her topic in a search engine only to discover, a few seconds later, several thousand ‘hits’ or matches. How can she limit this topic to make it more manageable? Even more critical is the need to evaluate and analyze each ‘hit’ or ‘match’ and determine if it is related to her topic. How does the user determine whether a particular source is reliable or prejudiced, a recognized authority on his subject or a 7th grader? Library users must be aware of the significant differences between general internet searches, which provide no easy way to distinguish between the trivial and the significant, and the databases, which facilitate academic pursuits.

Programs promoting information literacy grew out of the need to teach students to use electronic sources effectively, and to evaluate, synthesize, and cite sources correctly. To achieve this goal, Bridgewater’s academic librarians have adopted several strategies. Introduction to Information Resources, a required course which introduces students to the resources and services available at the Maxwell Library, has an internet component focusing on search engines, web sites, etc. When customized instruction is requested, librarians work closely with individual faculty members to design sessions to meet the needs of students in a particular course. The number of information literacy sessions offered at the Maxwell Library has increased steadily over the past few years: during the academic year 2000-2001, 5002 students participated in 246 bibliographic sessions. In addition, the library offers a number of forums to introduce faculty to the ever-changing world of information. We encourage collaboration between faculty and instructional librarians in an effort to improve the methods for teaching students how to be better researchers.

Librarians are playing an active role in developing strategies to promote information literacy. We want to provide the resources and services necessary to help BSC students graduate with a solid understanding of the new information technology.

Ratna Chandrasekhar began working at the Maxwell Library in 1982 and was a Senior Librarian at the time of her death in October, 2002. She served as Acting Director of the Library from 1991 to 1994. Ratna understood the enormous potential of computer technology and was instrumental in creating a classroom within the library dedicated to teaching the basics of computer-based research. Well known in the campus community for her dedication to students and faculty, Ratna was a beloved and valued member of the library staff.