

Biographical Info

Alison Head | Project Information Literacy (<http://projectinfolit.org>) (5-19-21)

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Short bio:

Alison J. Head, Ph.D. is an information scientist and social science researcher. She is the founder and director of Project Information Literacy (PIL), a research institute that studies what it is like to be a student in the digital age. In a series of 12 groundbreaking research studies with a collective sample of 21,000 undergraduates from U.S. colleges and universities, PIL has investigated how college students and recent graduates utilize research skills, competencies, and strategies for completing course work and for solving information problems and engaging with news in everyday life. Her research about today's students and their information practices began with a small study at Saint Mary's College of California, where she taught new media as the Roy O. Disney Visiting Professor in New Media for 10 years. More about Dr. Head's research and PIL is available at: <http://projectinfolit.org/>

Long bio:

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Research findings from PIL studies have informed and influenced academic librarians thinking and practices all over the world from community colleges to large public institutions and private elites. PIL has produced open-access learning tools to share PIL's ongoing research activities. (i.e., videos, infographics, podcasts, "Smart Talk" interviews, and "Practical PIL" page showcasing innovative library projects). Articles about PIL's work have appeared in *The Atlantic Magazine*, *The Huffington Post*, *Pacific Standard Magazine*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Education Week*, *Inside Higher Education*, *Library Journal*, and *The Seattle Times*. In a 2016, *Inside Higher Education* column, Barbara Fister called PIL "hands-down the most important long-term, multi-institutional research project ever launched on how students use information for school and beyond."

Recent research by PIL includes:

- In September 2021, PIL published a two-part OER series about the shape and flow of U.S. [media coverage about Covid-19](#), and its visual representation across time and digital space during the early months of 2020. Included in Report 1 are interactive data

- visualizations showing the results of a computational analysis of 125,696 news articles from 66 widely read national, metropolitan, and digital-only news websites. A follow-up analysis identifies the top 12 news outlets producing the most coverage ($N=74,737$) of Covid-19. In Report 2, a content analysis of 532 randomly selected news images from the top 12 outlets examined the visual representation of the coronavirus story. Five dominant visual themes – fear, hope, loneliness, determination, and grief – emerged from the sample of news images analyzed. Together, this series illustrates how the coronavirus story developed and spread, and how news is experienced in the 21st century, even as mass layoffs, mergers, and closures challenge the news industry. Applying a critical lens to how the news constructs our understanding of events develops *information agency* and makes individuals more discerning news consumers.
- In January 2021, PIL how college students conceptualize the ever-changing online information landscape, and navigate volatile and popular platforms that increasingly employ [algorithms to shape and filter content](#). PIL researchers conducted 16 focus groups with 103 undergraduates and interviewed 37 faculty members to collect qualitative data from eight US colleges and universities from across the country. Findings suggest that a majority of students know that popular websites, such as Google, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, use algorithms to collect massive amounts of their personal data, but still find sites too useful to abandon. Many are indignant about websites that mine their clicks to sell them products, but resigned to the powers of an unregulated media environment. Some students, however, used practical strategies to protect their privacy and “confuse algorithms,” learned more often from peers than in classes. The “Algo Study” was with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. In 2021, the report was selected as the ACRL’s Ilene F. Rockman Instruction Publication of the Year Award, 2021.
 - In October 2018, PIL released a comprehensive research effort exploring how U.S. college-age students are accessing, consuming, and [engaging with news](#) in the digital era, drawing findings from an online survey administered at a diverse mix of 11 colleges and universities from across the country, yielding a sample of 5,844 students. A computational analysis of Twitter data from survey respondents ($N = 731$) and a larger Twitter panel of more than 135,000 college-age persons provided observational and external comparative data to help frame the survey results. Findings suggest that while most students think news is important to democracy, they do not define news by traditional standards, nor do they necessarily assign authority based on the platform or authors from which news comes. Students know they need to invest the time and critical thinking to assemble, evaluate, and interpret news as it is delivered in the 21st century, and although many students make this effort, others do not. This mixed methods study was conducted with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and with a grant from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the largest division of the American Library Association (ALA).
 - In 2012, PIL launched "The PIL Passage Studies," a unique series of in-depth investigations about young adults and the critical information transitions

they experience in their lives. In 2012, PIL released its first Passage Study about the information-seeking behavior of college students once they graduate and [join the workplace](#). In 2013, PIL released its [first year study](#) about how students make the information transition from high school to college. In January 2016, PIL completed a two-year, large-scale study about recent college graduates and their [lifelong learning information-seeking habits](#). This large-scale study, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), investigated how recent college graduates at 10 different US colleges and universities conduct purposeful learning for staying adaptive and competitive in the workplace, engaging in community and civic life, and enriching and fulfilling their personal lives.

Alison has a Ph.D. in library and information science from the University of California at Berkeley where she also received her BA. She is a Visiting Scholar at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Senior Researcher at the metaLAB (at) Harvard University. She has been a Visiting Research Scholar at the following universities: University of Nebraska (2016-17), Purdue University (2017-18), University of Pittsburgh (2018-19), and Harvard Graduate School of Education (2019-20). In 2017, she was awarded the inaugural S. T. Lectureship in Library Leadership and Innovation from Harvard Library. From 2011 through 2015, Alison was a Fellow and Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. Her research about today's students and their information practices began with a small study at Saint Mary's College of California, where she taught new media as the Roy O. Disney Visiting Professor in New Media for 10 years.

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