

Political Science and Information Literacy

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As political scientists, we apply the scientific method to political phenomena to better understand the complex world around us. Our goal is to explain *why* things happen the way they do; rather than simply debating *normative* questions like politicians – what should be – we seek *positive*, or empirical, explanations – what is. We study the behavior of key actors (e.g., voters, politicians, judges, bureaucrats, etc.), institutions (e.g., parties, interest groups, government and non-government organizations, etc.) and the ever-changing political landscape across many jurisdictions (e.g., cities, states, nations, etc.) as well as the interactions between these entities. Our motivation may have normative foundations (e.g., democracy is good), but an appreciation for the scientific approach ensures our conclusions emerge from sound research practices.

Information Literacy (IL) is an important component of political science. According to the Association of College and Research Libraries²:

Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.

Here at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW), our students receive training in IL at several points in the curriculum. Besides the opportunity to learn these skills in university requirements (e.g., UNI 101), we expose our political science majors to a core set of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in several classes, including PLS 201 (Introduction to Political Science Methods), PLS 304 (Introduction to Public Policy Analysis), PLS 403 (Public Opinion), and PLS 404 (Campaign Management and Strategies).³ At the same time, political science is not possible without IL; independent of these SLOs and specific classes, IL is relevant across our curriculum at UNCW but also throughout our discipline.

Recently, the ACRL has published a *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* to better understand information literacy in an ever-changing information environment, which builds upon the foundation of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*.⁴ This framework addresses six key frames, each with its own set of knowledge practices and dispositions:

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as a Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

In this report, I briefly unpack each of these central concepts as they relate to political science.⁵

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² <http://www.ala.org/acrl/>

³ <https://uncw.edu/usac/informationliteracy.html>

⁴ http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/infolit/Framework_ILHE.pdf

⁵ I am indebted to Ms. Stephanie Crowe, the Social Sciences Library Liaison at UNCW, and the rest of the staff at Randall Library for their creation of an Information Literacy Fellows Program during the spring of 2018 which I was fortunate to participate in.

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.

In the polarized political climate of the 21st century, we often hear political statements presented as fact. This rhetoric – espoused from politicians, commentators, and the public alike – may be grounded in personal experience or ideological beliefs, but it is not necessarily anchored by peer-reviewed, academic research. While political scientists have expertise as indicated by their educational credentials and experience as teachers and researchers, it is important to acknowledge that these academics are not the sole authority on understanding political phenomena.

Political expertise and credibility are subjective – some individuals and groups see different sources as more trustworthy than others. Whether turning to different news sources or taking cues from political leaders, the public increasingly relies on different sets of cognitive shortcuts to operate in the political world. For example, Republicans turn to heroes like Ronald Reagan and Democrats to Bill Clinton. At the same time, this mythology fails to acknowledge that both of these past presidents would be far too moderate for the ideological wings of each political party today. The rich information environment today allows political entrepreneurs to gather “facts” to support their cause without necessarily considering opposing “facts.” Turned off from the polarized environment, some people simply disengage from politics all together, which can exacerbate the political divide.

Experts in information literacy, however, know that it is important to consider multiple sources and critically assess their contributions before drawing conclusions. Whether in the political marketplace or in an academic setting, expertise can take many forms. A professor may have 20 years of publications to support a particular argument, thus lending it credibility; however, a member of a city council or a public administrator may have 20 years of applied, practical experience that is also valuable. Similarly, an impoverished citizen may have significant experience as a recipient of government support, which provides a different form of expertise. Authority is contextual, and we should not assume the credibility of a source by its title alone. Rather, we should consider the perspective of the information provider, his or her goals, and the audience as we assess any piece of information. An authority may not necessarily be an expert, and an expert need not necessarily be an authority. Further, one person may view a source as authoritative that someone else would discount.

While authority is constructed and contextual, political scientists can provide expertise and authority in an information environment that eschews the scientific method in favor of normative arguments and conclusions.

Information Creation as a Process

Information in any format is produced to convey a message and is shared via a selected delivery method. The iterative processes of researching, creating, revising, and disseminating information vary, and the resulting product reflects these differences.

As students, we are goal-oriented. We want to complete an assignment so it is finished; only then can we receive a grade, pass a class, graduate, and get a job. As researchers, we must be process-oriented because the process has significant consequences for conclusions. In short, value the process, not the product.

Students often get frustrated in my introductory research methods class as they work on a research proposal; however, I remind them that the process is just as important as the end result. Regardless of the substantive topic of the paper, the scientific method is the scaffolding from which we produce research. Each step of the process is imperative to be successful at the following step. For example, a thoughtfully designed experiment is only effective if the theory underlying it adequately explains the causal mechanism you believe is at work. Students do not always enjoy receiving critical feedback, especially if it is unpleasant, but producers of information must be willing to revisit and revise their work.

One important aspect of scholarly work is the anonymous peer-review process. In short, researchers write manuscripts for articles or books and then submit them for review by other experts on the particular topic. In most cases, this is a double-blind process, meaning the author/s and the review/s do not know the other. This ensures information is evaluated on its merits and not by interpersonal relationships. Prior to publication, most work requires significant revisions, and more often than not, research is rejected for publication many more times than it is accepted. These hurdles are all part of the process to ensure the quality of the product.

Of course, published scholarly research is not the only form of information. Regardless of its format, all consumers should consider the process of how information is created prior to determining its value. Consider a comparison between traditional and new media. Traditional media sources (e.g., newspapers, radio, network news, etc.) produced content for a particular audience and as a result, this information was filtered by editors and producers accordingly. To gain employment in these fields, journalists and reporters likely earned credentials through education and experience. For comparison, consider the modern media environment, characterized by the internet and social media. Now, the bar to produce information is quite different, which greatly alters the final product.

Information has Value

Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination.

When students cite scholarly work in their papers, most understand that doing so gives credit to those who produced the information. Referencing the work of others acknowledges their expertise on the subject and the time it took to produce that information. Yet few among us consider information as a commodity with financial value. For example, at UNCW (a regional comprehensive university with nearly 17,000 students), Randall Library spent just under \$3million on its collection during 2017, which is approximately \$176.47 per student. More broadly, the existence of an entire sector of the economy dedicated to higher education, research, publication, etc., is evidence of the significant monetary value information holds.

Given the ease of access to information on the internet, we often take its value for granted. After all, everything is online and much of it is free, right? Regardless of the type of information (e.g., quotations, full articles, photographs, etc.), we must acknowledge the value of information throughout the research process, which includes making the appropriate citations and abiding by copyright laws. No one likes to pay \$100 for a textbook, yet the information within it is the result of valuable work by the authors, editors, illustrators, publishers, distributors, etc.

Information also has value due to its potential power. In a political setting, information – and more specifically, information asymmetry – can be very powerful. Those with more information can use this power for positive or nefarious ends. In politics, knowledge of the legislative process and constitutional

structure of government is extremely valuable to politicians, parties, and interest groups. Consider the president, who receives daily classified intelligence briefings, using his information asymmetry to justify certain actions or policies. As an extreme example, information about potential weapons of mass destruction served as the catalyst for the War in Iraq.

Producers and consumers alike must consider the value of information and its potential consequences. Our goal as political scientists is to understand the political world around us. To the extent previous research provides information about some aspect of our world, it has value we must acknowledge.

Research as Inquiry

Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.

Scientists – of political phenomena or otherwise – are inquisitive by nature. By asking questions, proposing explanations, and testing them empirically, we seek to understand the world around us. Yet, the world is so vast and the subjects to study so diverse, we need to focus our inquiry by asking specific questions. In my view, the research question is the most important part of any project. Ironically, the more students know about a particular topic, the more difficult it is for them to construct a clear research question. To me, a political science research question has three characteristics: 1) it examines a relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable, 2) it is a positive/empirical question as opposed to a normative question, and 3) the underlying relationship is such that a researcher can define its key concepts and measure its absence or presence.

Many students are accustomed to writing research papers about a particular topic, an assignment that often includes a significant literature review. While this can be useful, it is also just as likely to turn into a “book report” regurgitating the current scholarship. In assignments like these, it is very difficult to stay focused, especially if the author has significant interest and prior knowledge on the topic. Instead, I believe science is about asking specific questions and producing new knowledge. Complexity comes with each stage of the research process, so even a simple question can quickly become complicated. In my view, students also falsely assume a longer paper is a better paper because it shows the reader how intelligent the author is; however, writing a clear, concise paper is a much more worthy, albeit difficult, endeavor. Too often, students who can write dozens of pages on a topic or carry on a lengthy conversation cannot identify their specific research question, or their independent or dependent variable.

The research question is the foundation from which everything else is built, and starting with a faulty foundation is always a recipe for disaster. When students think of research topics, say, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, they do not realize that they could spend an entire career researching such a topic without coming up with a final answer. I often say that students cannot solve Middle East peace in a 16-week semester, but they can develop a tractable research question that speaks to this larger issue.

Experts in this frame recognize that asking quality questions will only produce additional questions. As a result, successful research builds on the current scholarship and makes a meaningful contribution to the field. While the question itself may not be unique, this contribution may include a novel argument or methodological approach, or even marshal new data to answer an existing question. Importantly, we must also acknowledge that our research may not fully answer a question; in other words, research is never truly finished, but each individual project should offer a clear contribution to our existing knowledge.

Scholarship as a Conversation

Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.

As academics, our research is only valuable if we can share our findings with other academics, practitioners, and the public. Too often, academics only talk to academics, practitioners talk to practitioners, and the public thinks no one cares enough to talk to them! There are many avenues to have productive conversations within and between these groups. While political scientists communicate with each other in journals and books, we can speak to political practitioners and the public through policy “white papers”, newspaper coverage, public speeches/forums, etc. Increasingly, news media provides political scientists with a mouthpiece to discuss our research and its implications to the public; the internet is a fertile ground to continue this trend. For example, online blogs like The Monkey Cage (Washington Post)⁶ or platforms like Twitter allow academics to interact with those outside the academy.

To be sure, any conversation must have a willing listener; sometimes, political practitioners and the public are not interested in the results of our research or they do not understand the scholarly jargon we often rely on. It is imperative that we find effective means through which to communicate. Even the best work is only as good as how the manner in which it is communicated; if our readers do not listen, it is our fault not theirs. Therefore, researchers must adjust their presentation depending on the audience and the mode of communication. For example, skilled scholars can deliver the same substantive message to a radio audience, to a friend over coffee, or to a room full of professionals. Our field requires much more than writing skills; we must excel at oral communication and have adept interpersonal skills.

Scholarship as a conversation does not simply mean scholars can talk to others, but we must also listen to others, regardless of their academic rigor. What good is studying Congress if we cannot learn from the politicians who serve on Capitol Hill? Importantly, students can also be part of this conversation. Even in an undergraduate setting studying a simple research question, students should still seek to make a contribution to the ongoing conversation about their area of research.

Whether producing scholarly research, speaking to the public, or crafting public policy, we should also seek critical feedback on our work. This criticism helps us revise our work to more effectively communicate our argument and conclusions.

In politics, too many of us err in thinking problems have simple solutions – “I am right, you are wrong.” Political scientists understand that the world is complicated and there are many more shades of gray outside of black and white. Just as the political world we seek to understand is complicated, so too is our research. In politics, there are constantly new phenomena to study, so experts in this frame understand that the scholarly conversation never has a clean ending, it merely evolves.

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.

In my political science classes, students often ask how many sources are necessary to complete the assignment. While a set number may be preferable to students and easy for a professor to assess, searching

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/>

for information is truly an exploration that lacks a true end. I describe the process as a “treasure hunt,” yet it is important to search for information in a strategic and focused manner.

In my view, the literature review serves two purposes. First, it helps the author learn about the extant scholarship so they know where they can contribute. Second, crafting a literature review helps the reader understand how the current article fits in with past research. Importantly, the literature review alone is not a completed project; rather, it is a single step in the research process.

Even prior to beginning your search, you need to be strategic in planning what you are looking for. I suggest starting with the key relationship of interest (main IV and DV). What do scholars already know about the IV? About the DV? Have any scholars examined a similar relationship in the past? Perhaps you can explain how political scientists define or measure elusive concepts, or describe the conclusions of earlier work. Oftentimes, the main take away point from an article is sufficient as the reader can follow the reference should he or she be curious for more information.

When students fail to find sources after a few minutes, they get frustrated, however, you need to think strategically. Perhaps this question is something other fields have considered. For example, the field of psychology has greatly informed research on voting behavior, just as economics forms the foundation for many areas of political science. Perhaps you cannot locate research on how voters take cues from political elites in local elections, but you can certainly find research on voters taking cues in other circumstances.

It is very difficult to teach students how to write an effective literature review. The best way to learn this skill is to work at it over time. There is no perfect blueprint, every search is different, and each attempt is certainly not a linear process. Even after locating potential sources, experts in this frame critically assess the value of each source. Oftentimes, we discover a source may be less helpful than we initially thought. Even after we identify a sufficient collection of sources, they represent a puzzle that we must organize for the reader.

Going back to the treasure hunt analogy, as you are conducting a literature review, you will find clues along the way. If research continuously points to a particular source or theory, it is likely that you have identified a seminal work in that area. From there, you can move forward to see what other research has cited that source. You can also work backward by looking at the list of references within a source you have found valuable. Most all research will discuss prior scholarship, so be strategic and use this as a resource. Of course, be sure you cite any work that is not your own.

While scholarly works are often the gold standard in academia, other sources can also have a place. Newspaper articles, quotes from interviews, or statistics may be helpful to make a point, however, they do not supplant scholarly research. In the end, your goal is to give a full picture of the existing scholarship in a concise and efficient manner so you can move on to your explicit contribution.

Information Literacy, Political Science, and Politics

In sum, considering information literacy from the perspective of political science is valuable for students, academics, and practitioners alike. Perhaps more than ever, the information we consume has significant consequences for how we operate as researchers, but also as citizens in an increasingly complex political world. Even if students or practitioners have little interest in the research process, an empirical approach to political phenomena will change the way they consume politics in their everyday lives.