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## Training the Masses in “Informational Awareness”

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Starting in 2015, people in the United States visiting the grocery store or pharmacy were exposed to a new incarnation of "the tabloids." Up to that point in 2015, the tabloids in the United States were primarily about entertainers and their "agonizing last days," "plastic surgery nightmares," feuds with other entertainers, and their private lives. What changed on two of the tabloids that purchase premium space in these retail venues is that the people on the cover were running for President of the



Figure 1: Example of tabloids in supermarkets during US presidential election

United States. The tabloid on the top of the stand always had Trump and was laudatory. The tabloid on the bottom always had Clinton or Obama and was derogatory (Figure 1). These two magazines are unavoidable in many supermarkets, being placed next to the checkout counter and being visible to anyone approaching. The other unusual aspect of these tabloids is that their covers and stories are chosen by Trump. The owner and publisher have a close relationship with Trump and permit him the freedom to plot his own course. Ironically, the same issue that lauds Trump on the cover may have an offer for a mug commemorating Obama's presidency on the back.

These tabloids are an excellent example of how we encounter and perform an elaborate filter on information every day. Some of us get up, make our coffee, go out to the curb to get the paper, then enjoy our morning coffee and paper together. Some of us watch a half hour of local news and then a half hour of national news when we get home from work. Most of us, and especially younger adults, are barraged every day with headlines from texts, Facebook, SnapChat, Steam, etc. They perform a remarkable job filtering that information and making decisions, including deciding whether to obtain more information from different sources.

The first step we are all taking in our daily dance of information filtration is to recognize or determine the perspective of the sender of the information, then to possibly go to the website the information comes from, and then maybe even check the source of the information. Teaching informational awareness requires first helping our students to recognize they are doing this and that they, too, have a perspective. Everyone has a perspective. When we do not like the perspective of the sender, the website, or the source we say they are “biased.” If the sender, website, or source are a government with a perspective we do not like we say they are spreading “propaganda.” When an adversary spreads information through a means meant to hide who spread or created the information in order to deceive decision-makers or the public, we call that “active measures.”

Methods for creating and spreading active measures always start at home as a test bed, making Trump’s tabloid covers seen by millions every week more of an active measure than propaganda. The US public is not used to seeing politicians on the covers of checkout-stand-tabloids every week. Even if you didn’t read the cover carefully, the photo and headline of the top was always laudatory of Trump and the bottom derogatory of Clinton or Obama. Week after week the US grocery-buying public was exposed to Trump’s active measures. We can filter out most of what is on the covers as sensational and ultimately minute in effect.

If the same information were contained in a television advertisement, most US persons would know the information was from the Trump campaign, but whence comes the tabloid covers and why are they being used particularly for such important issues as whether Clinton committed war crimes? People who read *The New Yorker* have special insight into this because of an article published in 2017 (Toobin, 2017), but what about the people who have not read that article?

The concept of “informational awareness” as presented here is an offshoot of “situational awareness” as practiced by intelligence operators. Situational awareness is quite simply a quick, and as accurate as can be performed, assessment of one’s surroundings, including people, location, access to egress, and the need for a weapon. It is also a quick assessment of what type of filter to use in speaking to an interlocutor (Manjikian, 2015). Experience leads, for the most part, to a successful reconnoitering of location and people to lead to a positive outcome. I argue that we can use this to self-consciously teach young adults to perform a quick assessment of their information environment, including recognizing their own perspectives and what filter to use in recognizing other people’s and sources’ perspectives.

A similar problem arises in recognizing humor, hashtag hijacking, and how few people it actually takes to have an effect on an issue on the Internet. For example, in April 2014, about the time of the Occupy Wall Street protests, the New York Police Department (NYPD) issued a challenge for people to post a picture of



Figure 2: Example from #MyNYPD photo campaign

themselves with a member of the NYPD including the hashtag #MyNYPD. Many people did so, and the unfortunate result was the posting of violent interactions between the NYPD and people as in Figure 2. Other examples include online polls to name something: a new flavor of Mountain Dew (Rosenfeld, 2012) (Figure 3),

the name of the City of Austin's Solid Waste Services Department (Figure 4), or a boat in the UK: RSS Boaty McBoatface (Rogers, 2016). In none of these instances did more than a few thousand people affect the poll. Indeed, a subscriber to Twitter receives a localized trend list, some of which have only a few thousand uses of the same phrase or hashtag. On a big game day in Indianapolis, the top trending topics will be the game, individual player names, or a disputed call (Figure 5).

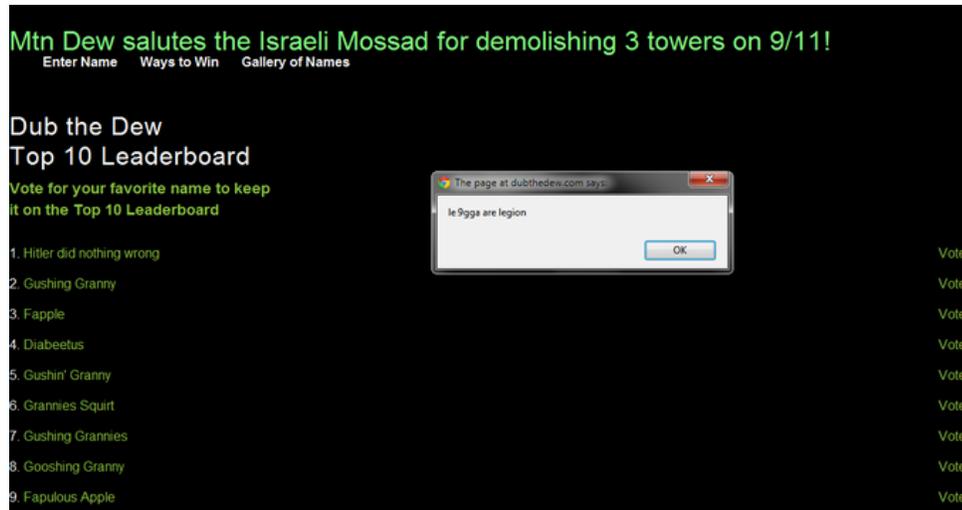


Figure 4: 4chan and Bronies interfere with Dub the Dew campaign

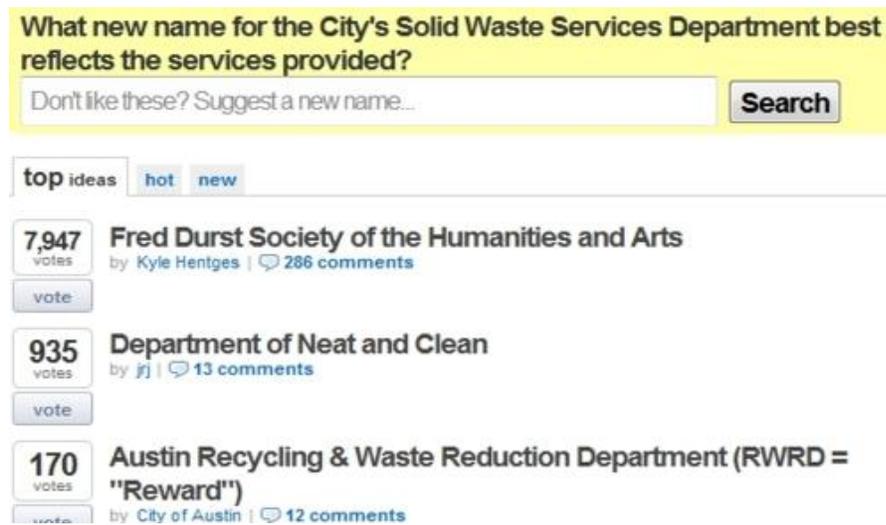


Figure 3: Online poll humor in Austin, TX

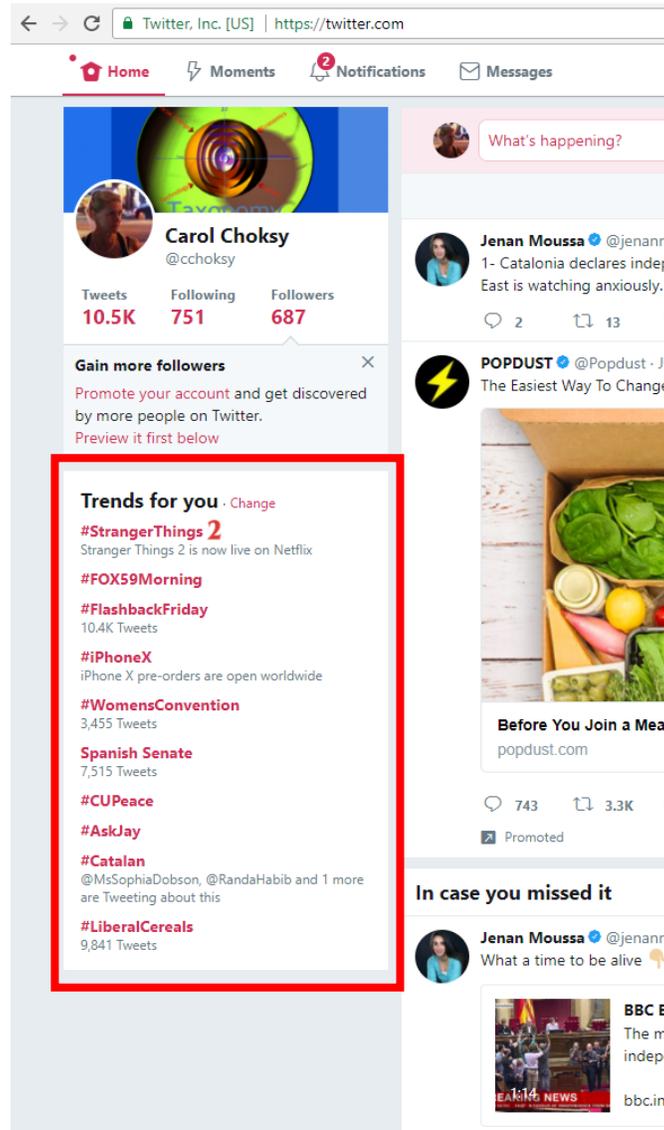


Figure 5: Author's Twitter feed 20171027. Note the second trending topic is local.

If you were in Wisconsin in October it is entirely possible that a few well-intentioned but unwitting individuals would share or re-tweet news stories specially crafted to play to their perspectives, created by another not well-intentioned individual, and that topic or hashtag appeared as trending in their feed because it was popular locally but not nationally or internationally. Unlike the “total information awareness” office created by DARPA in 2003 as a means to obtain as much information as possible about terrorists, informational awareness is human,

personal, and intended to assist everyone in recognizing perspectives, not just report intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Unlike the ACRL's *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (ACRL Board, 2016), I take as a starting point the way humans encounter information everyday: an onslaught. Although librarians do need to assist students when they are performing research for their assignments, they must also recognize that they are fighting the onslaught of information from texts, Steam, SnapChat, Facebook, friends, and Thanksgiving dinner with crazy Uncle Al.

UNESCO suggests that only at the end of a lifetime studying "media literacy" could one actually attain literacy (Unifying Notions of Media and Information Literacy, 2017). Studies are done every year to help us further "Understand the role and functions of media in democratic societies," "Understand the conditions under which media can fulfil their functions," "Critically evaluate media content in the light of media functions," etc. The starting points for the ACRL and UNESCO frameworks are mature professions with very particular concerns, not the human inundated with snippets of information on a daily basis.

The first step in attaining informational awareness is in recognizing what audience snippets or "headlines" are meant to attract. That requires NOT reading the headline, but reading the advertising that come with the headline. That means introducing the concept that everyone has a perspective and our job is to determine what that perspective is. When we do not like someone's perspective we say they are biased. When we do not like what an institution is publishing, we say their information is propaganda. When that propaganda is being slipped into our conversation through sources that appear familiar but are in fact foreign, we call that active measures.

Discussion with peers is vital as is discussing terms such as "reliable" or "trustworthy," terms the Intelligence Community and the library and information science field rely upon to their detriment. The Intelligence Community introduced a scale of reliability to be used by analysts—not operators, i.e., collectors—that puts into perspective how confident analysts are in the information informing their analysis. The problem with the words "reliable" and "trustworthy" is that they depend upon a scale from zero to 100 percent. No source is, nor could it be, 100 percent reliable or trustworthy. Students are introduced to this at the beginning of class with a simple question: "Are your friends reliable?" The answer is always "yes, of course." The follow-up question is whether their friends always tell the truth. The answer is always "of course not." This then begins a conversation about what "reliable" means used that way. The class arrives at the understanding that as they listen to their friends they are using a filter for their friend's perspective. That introduces the conversation that everyone has a perspective and then conversations about bias, propaganda, and finally active measures ensue.

After introducing the concept of perspectives, bias, propaganda, and active measures to my undergraduate students, I show them that their ability to judge the audience of a web site goes far beyond what they may imagine. I show them news websites in foreign languages posted by news.google.com. For example, Figure 6 is a Korean news site. When asked what audience this web site wishes to reach, students conclude it is a young adult audience, possible male.



Figure 6: Korean news website used to help students recognize an audience

The next example, Figure 7, is from the landing page of the mobile version of Breitbart. The advertisement suggests the Breitbart Store and the purchase of a t-shirt with a picture of a man shouting angrily. Students usually decide that other angry men would most likely be interested in a t-shirt of an angry man, but need to be prodded to ask whether making the landing site a t-shirt offer doesn't make it more of a "club" than a news site. Older audiences identify the angry man as an angry, white man. Note that we had not read any headlines, articles, or editorial policies yet, we just looked at the advertising.



Figure 7: Breitbart News landing screen

Going next to InfoWars, Figure 8, always requires reminding the students not to read the headlines, just the advertising. Students are asked to discuss what type of person would need to purchase a product called “Brain Force Plus.” They determine it is a person who is uncertain of their own mental abilities or may have noticed themselves having lost some abilities, and that person is not them, young people.

**INFO WARS**

THE ALEX JONES RADIO SHOW  
LISTEN NOW

RADIO SHOW NEWS VIDEOS STORE TOP STORIES BREAKING NEWS CONTACT

**OFFICIALS DEFY TRUMP'S PROMISES: 40 MILES OF BORDER ORDERED UNPATROLLED**  
GOVERNMENT 53 COMMENTS

**LAST CHANCE: EASTER MEGA SPECIALS EXTENDED FOR A LIMITED TIME**  
**30% OFF**  
BRAIN FORCE PLUS  
FLIP THE SWITCH & SUPERCHARGE YOUR STATE OF MIND  
GET YOURS NOW

**TODAY ON THE ALEX JONES SHOW**

Monday, April 17: Google Caught in Giant Censorship Scandal - On today's show we look at ways Google is working to censor Infowars.com in search results...

**FEATURED STORIES** ALL NEWS [READ MORE](#)

Figure 8: InfoWars example

The next informational awareness step is looking at a website that does not have advertising on the landing page. In this case we look at RT (Russia Today) which has only headlines. So, we read the headlines to determine who are the winners and the losers (Figure 9). A think-pair-share activity is a good exercise for this website to slow down students' rush to judgment by comparing their thinking with others. On any normal day, the United States and the West are the losers and Russia is the winner. Once students determine this, learning that the website is financed by the Kremlin is no surprise. Students cannot, however, be left with the impression that US newspapers like *The New York Times* are completely without winners and losers, as China is often the loser in the race for news there. This emphasizes the concept that everyone has a perspective and that no perspective is neutral.

After reviewing RT, students are asked to work in groups to find a website they believe is not completely reliable and then to produce a list of what criteria they used to determine the credibility of the site. Most often they arrive at the conclusion that while a site like the Daily Kos or Breitbart may have valuable information on occasion, they must wade through so many articles with an obviously extreme perspective that it is not worth the time spent. At this point students are usually ready to recognize these sources as being interesting, but not useful.

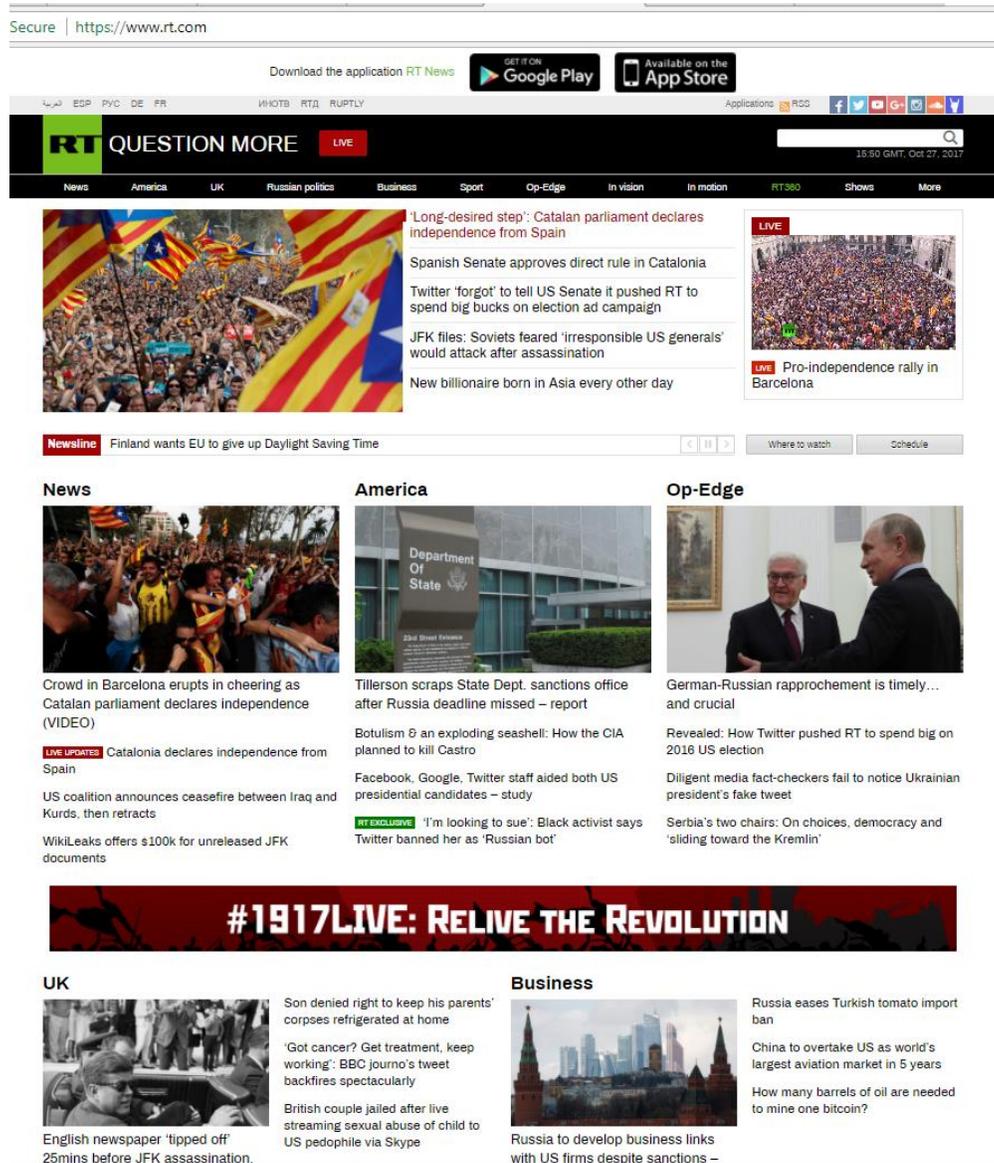


Figure 9: RT example has no advertising

Finally, students are introduced to the “about” section of a news site. ZeroHedge is used because the landing page has what appear to be local Google ads for grocery stores, frozen foods, etc. that we might see in a normal local newspaper. One item indicates the web site is not a normal news source: a tab at the top marked “Donate.” One is greeted with even more advertising and a very odd set of statements: “to liberate oppressed knowledge, to provide analysis uninhibited by political constraint, to facilitate information's unending quest for

freedom.” Students are asked to decide what this means and they most often find a section titled “Manifesto.” Upon reading the “Manifesto,” they question the need for “pseudonymous speech” and then go looking for the authors. On the day this was written, the authors of the three articles on the Manifesto page are: GoldCore, Capitalist Exploits, and Lord Feverstone. The first two are advertisers and the third is a “Member.” Student discussion usually produces the result that they are very distrustful of a web site that presents itself as news but in fact is just advertising.

Students are then asked if they are operator-collectors and are assigned to assess the range of moods in a country, would it be useful to look at sites with different perspectives, and if even those for angry white men might be helpful. Students are asked whether going after only the most reliable sources could produce all perspectives reflected in a country. After more think-pair-share discussions, the class concludes that understanding the perspective of “biased” sources is as important as “unbiased” sources.

Assignments to further exercise students’ experience in recognizing different perspectives include having them select a news story written by newspapers in three languages the student does not read. Students are encouraged to use Chrome’s auto-translate feature, which they are taught to use, and given caveats during a separate lab session to “read” the three articles. A strict writing rubric reflecting business and Intelligence Community bottom-line-up-front, five-paragraph essays help the students compare and contrast the perspectives of each article (Figure 10). Conspiracy theories provide other opportunities for students to exercise their recognition of different perspectives. Students who follow the guidelines of the assignment, put in the time to write according to the rubric, and revise the article at least once before submissions normally achieve an ‘A.’

Once students are comfortable with the concept of perspective and the need to collect a number of different perspectives they are introduced to cognitive biases. By this time, they are able to recognize the ubiquity and problems raised by cognitive bias in others, as well as themselves. Biases such as anchor bias, availability heuristic, groupthink, blind-spot bias, clustering illusion, confirmation bias, and ostrich effect are discussed in class with the aid of humor. Most students need multiple exposures to the basic cognitive biases in separate courses to remember the names and particularities, but generally recognize cognitive biases in themselves and others. Ideologically strict students have the greatest difficulty with perspective and cognitive bias. They will tend to use argument techniques most often found in more political environments. They also make classroom learning difficult for other students by trying to argue their specific perspectives as “true.”

An instructor’s best technique is to indicate that the student’s subject matter is not on the agenda and then guide the class back to the course objectives.

Traits	Poor = 0	Good = 3	Excellent = 5
<b>Focus &amp; Details</b>	The topic and main ideas are not clear.	There is one topic. Main ideas are somewhat clear.	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main ideas are clear.
<b>Introduction</b>	Introduction states the main topic	Introduction states the main topic and provides an overview of the paper	The introductory paragraph states the main topic, each point made in the body of the paper, and the concluding remarks.
<b>Conclusion</b>	Conclusion restates the main topic or states a conclusion	The conclusion states the main topic and a conclusion is included.	The concluding paragraph states the main topic, each point made in the body of the paper, and the concluding remarks.
<b>Research</b>	Research is clearly lacking.	Research is not thorough.	Research is thorough and is well-supported by detailed and accurate information.
<b>Research Presentation</b>	Research not presented	Research not clearly presented	Research clearly presented.
<b>Source Perspective</b>	Author has not determined sources’ perspectives	Most sources’ perspectives have been determined.	All sources’ perspectives described.
<b>Source Context</b>	Author has not determined sources’ context	Most sources’ contexts have been determined	All sources’ contexts described.
<b>Voice &amp; Audience Focus</b>	The author’s purpose of writing is unclear.	The author’s purpose of writing is somewhat clear, and there is evidence of attention to audience. The author’s knowledge and/or experience with the topic is/are limited.	The author’s purpose of writing is very clear, and there is strong evidence of attention to audience. The author’s knowledge and/or experience with the topic is evident.
<b>Word Choice</b>	The writer uses a limited vocabulary. Jargon or clichés may be present and detract from the meaning.	The author uses words that communicate clearly, but the writing lacks variety.	The author uses precise words and phrases. The choice and placement of words seems accurate, natural, and not forced.
<b>Sentence Structure</b>	Sentences sound awkward, are distractingly repetitive, or are difficult to understand.	Most sentences are well constructed, but they have a similar structure and/or length.	All sentences are well constructed and have varied structure and length.
<b>Grammar, Mechanics, &amp; Spelling</b>	The author makes numerous errors in grammar, mechanics, and/or spelling that interfere with understanding.	The author makes several errors in grammar, mechanics, and/or spelling that interfere with understanding.	The author makes no errors in grammar, mechanics, and/or spelling.

Figure 10: Grading rubric for informational awareness assignment

Twitter and Facebook are much more complex information environments than websites purporting to represent news. Each requires a deeper dive into the profile of a user and review of their posts over time. Students are taken on a search expedition of examples that lead to questions about who is behind the source. One of those examples is PatriotJournal.com which is linked to Twitter and Facebook accounts that do not have advertising. The About page leads to authors who are not professional journalists and an editor named “PJ Editor.” A reverse image search of the person depicted as the author produces no useful results. Attempts to learn who owns the website are currently futile as the ICANN look up leads to a “Domains by Proxy” web site. A Google search “who owns PatriotJournal.com” reveals a Facebook page saying that the page was founded by Mike Spence. The

page is a “personal blog” by Mike Spence of Las Vegas, NV. Further web searches suggest an association with the Tea Party and with a Wordpress blog started in 2009. After this journey, students are asked who is paying for Mr. Spence to have a web site, Twitter feed, and Facebook page. Their conclusion is that there is no visible means of support.

Informational awareness dictates that instead of starting with complex questions of “authenticity,” “reliability,” and “trustworthiness,” students begin with the question of how to begin deciphering what is in front of them every day by asking who do the ads indicate is the audience. When there are no ads, they read headlines to determine winners and losers. When the ads and the headlines clash, as with ZeroHedge, they are sent to find clues as to why, like reading the “about” page to determine what the website claims to be doing and who is doing the writing and editing. Informational awareness is about reading the context of the things we encounter every day in the same way we read people and places to decide if we want greater interaction.

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