
Entitled to the Facts

A Fact-Checking Role for Librarians

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In this piece I share some work in which my colleagues and I have been involved in our hometown. This work adds a dimension to reference work and library service that has been an interesting and welcome addition to our daily jobs.

Just three weeks after our new president took office in 2017, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reflected on the new administration and referred to a “rising tide of conflict and incivility.”¹ While many agree that the levels of incivility have risen like a swollen river in 2017, with no one sure where the river will crest, Americans struggle with an inability to discuss political differences, even among friends and relatives. Feeling like we have backpedaled to a new low in our history, perhaps we forget incivilities from our past such as the famous canning of Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor in 1856. Those historical events seem unfathomable in our purportedly more sophisticated day and age.

In an attempt to sidestep incivility, people assiduously avoid contentious topics. Also worrisome is the frustration among college faculty, and even college presidents, with students’ lack of open-mindedness to opinions and positions that challenge their own.² The French have been somewhat applauded for their ability to have spirited conversations between friends who openly and respectfully disagree, most assuredly assisted by a good bottle of French wine. This leaves us wondering why Americans are different. Why have we grown intolerant of opinions divergent from our own? Where did we lose our way in our capacity to carry on respectful discourse, or at least the ability to agree that we disagree? For a nation that is perhaps one of the most secure on earth, Americans seem to be exhibiting a modicum of insecurity. Factions take positions that have real consequences in people’s pocketbooks, livelihoods, and personal lives. Libraries serve their communities well, but what more can libraries do to help this situation?

Over the past four years, I have had the good fortune, through my work, to be involved in a program that seeks to create a safe and tolerant space for conversation about many common issues in our daily lives. The American Public Square (<http://americanpublicsquare.org>) is a program that provides a community forum for meaningful and sometimes difficult conversations. The American Public Square organizes programs about community, health, education, civics, and faith, bringing “together non-like-minded people for fact-based, civil conversations about national, regional, and local issues.”³

Many events begin with a dinner that organizers view as an important part of the evening. Dinners are “civilizing,” explains founder Allan Katz.⁴ It is more difficult to be uncivil with someone you have befriended over dinner. Ground rules do not permit clapping for one side or the other. Listening rules the day. A major goal of the evening is to achieve dialog with civility. Moderators and fact-checkers have civility bells at the ready to ring if anyone’s tone rises to an uncivil level. Rarely does the bell ring.

Each event features a panel of either national or local experts on the subject for the evening. Some of the topics have included the following:

- Religion and Race: Chasm or Bridge?
- Who’s Our Neighbor? A Conversation on Neighborhoods, Poverty, and Race
- Why Can’t We Be Friends: Civility and Politics
- A Dose of Reality: A Medicaid Status Report
- Muslim in the Metro
- Reevaluating the Death Penalty
- Live, Work, Play: Social Determinants of Health
- Varieties of Spiritual Experience
- Crossroads of Religion and Politics

Panels of four tackle the issue of the evening (or day), facilitated by a moderator. Panelists have included Sherry Green (president, National Alliance for Model State Drug Laws), Melissa Robinson (CEO, Black Health Care Coalition), Tricia Bushnell (Midwest Innocence Project), Kris Kobach (Kansas secretary of state), Kathleen Sebelius (former secretary for Health and Human Services), and former senator John Danforth. National topics lend themselves well to national figures; regional and local topics call on local experts. Frequently, the local public broadcasting station films the event for replay, and a lively Nick Haines, executive producer for public affairs for KCPT, roams the audience seeking the best questions for the panel and infusing a touch of humor to keep attitudes on an even keel. There is nothing not improved by humor.

The model is similar to many town halls broadcasted on television around election time. The American Public Square events always include fact checkers to give the audience the opportunity to challenge panelists’ claims and to give the event a greater sense of legitimacy and authority in the presentation of the facts. This is where librarians enter!

Four years ago, when American Public Square staff contacted the library for librarians willing to fact-check, UMKC librarians enthusiastically stepped up to volunteer, sensing that this was a program of substance and something important for the community. For four years, the UMKC librarians,

working in pairs, have staffed the fact-checking table. At every event, the fact-checkers are introduced to the public. It is one wonderful way to show the value and worth of our profession and the value of the reference librarian!

The audience uses fact-checking slips of paper on which they scribble their question or challenge a fact they heard. When librarians have a particularly interesting fact to check, they can take the microphone and announce the answer to the room. Panelists are on notice that librarians will fact-check their claims.

Can fact-checking get intense? Yes. Some evening’s topics leave fact-checkers overwhelmed with questions while other topics are more manageable. At times, it can feel like the ultimate trivia contest, if not “reference-to-go.” Librarians benefit from this close community contact and learn much as they fact-check their way through the evening. Isn’t this one of the things for which we have been trained—sorting fact from fiction and misinterpretation? This is a perfect blend of reference and user service.

Local libraries, public and private universities, schools, foundations, and community centers in the Kansas City area partner with the American Public Square to provide space to hold these public forums. One of the beauties of the program is that it involves libraries in a very dynamic way. Kansas City Public Library and the Truman Presidential Library are two highly involved libraries. Community centers in the

city’s underserved neighborhoods and local churches have also offered space for programs. Audiences vary depending on the event location, and that too is a goal of the program. One event, “Who’s Our Neighbor?” was held at a local, prestigious, private high school where juniors were challenged to think about the poverty in their midst juxtaposed against their lives of privilege.

Since our early history, libraries have been a place where people gathered for community, intellectual inquiry and understanding. Libraries are the living room of today’s communities. Churches and libraries have built-in audiences that make them attractive partners for the program. While libraries have excelled at distributing content to remote users 24/7, their role in facilitating learning through physical congregation fosters community. It is an important role to maintain as libraries move forward. Libraries need to look for new ways to feed the intellectual needs and the curious minds of our community members, helping them to understand the issues of the day. And through programs like this, libraries help citizens participate in strengthening their own sense of community. People cannot ask a question of a television show. People may not take time, or have time to read a book on all the issues they confront in their daily lives. What better way to assist our users than to host events that engage them in deeper understanding?



FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

While we all share a common interest in national issues, complex local issues in all our communities also require our focus and understanding, and they lack solid media coverage. Kansas City has several hotly contested issues including tax increment financing, the contentious proposal to build a new airport, and an expensive taxpayer funded streetcar system.

The American Public Square evolved out of a program known as the Village Public Square, launched eleven years ago in Florida. Ambassador Allan Katz, former ambassador to Portugal and a distinguished professor of public administration at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, was a co-founder of the Village Public Square. Ambassador Katz further developed the program in Kansas City when he arrived at the university. American Public Square is a member-based organization, but anyone is welcome to attend the forums. For events that include dinner, scholarships are available.

There are other organizations offering similar opportunities for civil dialog. The American Public Square is one option. Staff are willing to share information about their organization, and partnerships such as this are an interesting way for libraries and librarians to put their skills to good use and serve their communities.

References

1. David Brooks, *PBS News Hour*, PBS, February 10, 2017.
2. Meghan Holohan, “‘Not a Daycare’ College President Says ‘Snowflake’ Student Problem Persists,” *Today*, August 9, 2017, <http://www.today.com/parents/not-daycare-college-president-calls-out-snowflakes-t102226>.
3. American Public Square about page, University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed August 5, 2017, <http://americanpublicsquare.org/about/>.
4. Alan Katz, interview with Chris LeBeau, February 9, 2017.