Dear Sarah,

I would like to answer your question as to why and how, especially with the Internet and search engines like Google, librarians contribute to the United States being an informed society.

Librarians are information professionals. An LIS professional receives an advanced degree (an MLS or an MLIS), and understands how to collect and organize information so that it is available and accessible to the rest of us. He or she connects data, knowledge, and information with people. Librarians also serve as guides to help determine what might be the best information for specific needs. As you know, there is a large amount of accumulated knowledge accessible through printed materials and on the Internet, and today the library is both a physical and an electronic place. The sheer volume can be difficult to navigate. With an understanding of the information infrastructure (that is, everything that enables information to be transmitted!), the librarian can guide a patron toward that which is most appropriate and helpful, and away from that which might be less so.

LIS professionals work in many settings, primarily in academic, school, special, or public libraries. In the U.S., public libraries have long been considered vital to an informed society, as they provide free and equal access to information. As non-profit institutions, and within the context of the culture and community, public libraries can and should have no specific agenda in terms of what they make available.

An informed society enables a democracy to exist. When information is shared, people can discuss and agree or disagree on issues, but in the process a society is made.
When Thomas Paine published his extremely popular pamphlet *Common Sense* in 1776, the British colonists were able to talk about their shared base of information regarding political and economic issues, which eventually moved the colonies to war against Britain. Today, you and I can log on to the website “Vote-smart.org”, which claims to provide unbiased information on candidates, politicians’ voting records, and local and national issues. This resource also provides a shared knowledge base from which individuals can make informed decisions.

For the LIS professional, following various information policies set by the American Library Association means balancing social, political, and economic interests in providing information to patrons. LIS professionals can also restrict access, whether intentionally or not, if they are not careful to consider their own biases in what might be best for their patrons. Librarians must constantly balance intellectual freedom with constraints imposed by society.

One political and social issue impacting libraries is that of children and the use of the Internet in the public library. Federal legislation known as the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which was passed by Congress in 2000, forces most public libraries to follow certain guidelines, primarily by using filtering software on computers.

The Hampden branch of the Denver Public Library (DPL) follows DPL’s guidelines in interpreting the federal law and state regulations. Two computers in the children’s area use filtering software, which cannot be disabled. The other seven computers in the main area of the library have filtering software which can be disabled by adult users. Children and adults have different library cards.
The library wants as many computers accessible to as many patrons as possible, which at the Hampden branch involves a reservation system. DPL also believes that parents have the ultimate responsibility for what their children view on the Internet. When I asked about it, I was given a copy of the policy entitled “Computer Use and the Internet at the Denver Public Library”, which is also available online at the DPL website. This policy includes tips for parents (who DPL believes has the ultimate say in their children’s use of the Internet) such as taking Internet classes, setting strict guidelines, teaching online safety, and, of course, asking a librarian!

I also have a personal example of a librarian helping me. I was looking specifically for statistics on newspaper use. I viewed online databases available through the D.U. library, and I also “googled” several phrases such as “newspaper readership” and “newspaper statistics”. I was struggling. I asked a librarian at the Hampden Library, and she suggested that perhaps the newspaper industry might have an organization that would keep those statistics. Sure enough, when I “googled” the term “newspaper industry”, I retrieved several helpful websites, especially that of the Newspaper Association of America. The concept of the newspaper industry had not even occurred to me.

This experienced librarian knew the language which would be most helpful for me in my search. Because of her and other LIS professionals, the United States is a more informed society than it would be without them. Librarians collect and organize information, and have skills to help users navigate the vast array of information available through print, media, and online resources. I think that now, more than ever, we need LIS professionals to help keep us not just informed, but well-informed.
Part Two

Introduction

Democratization is the transition from an authoritarian or a semi-authoritarian political system to a democratic political system; the latter is “a form of government for a nation state, or for an organization in which all the citizens have an equal vote or voice in shaping policy.” (Wikipedia) In the history of the United States, newspapers have played an important role as a democratizing technology in informing the citizenry. Currently, newspapers remain an important medium for information.

History of the Newspaper

The earliest “newspaper” was one sheet printed in Rome in 59 BC called Acta Diurna (Daily Events) and was posted throughout Rome as decreed by Julius Caesar. The earliest known printed newspaper was prepared in Beijing in 748 AD. Gutenburg’s press (1451 AD) allowed mass production of printed materials, including newspapers, throughout Europe, and “the first North American newspaper, Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick, was published in 1690 in Boston.” The first U.S. daily paper was the Pennsylvania Packet in 1784. (www.newspaper-industry.org/history)

The Newspaper in Early America

“A faith in the emancipatory potential of communications has long been one of the most distinctive, and enduring, of American cultural traits.” (John, 2000) The information infrastructure from the 1760’s to about 1920 consisted of the post office, the railway, the telegraph, and the telephone. With the adoption of the Constitution, the government felt obliged to create an informed citizenry. Newspapers had an important role in this as the government subsidized their delivery through the mail system. In the 50
years following the adoption of the Constitution, newspaper circulation increased. “In 1800, the postal system transmitted 1.9 million newspapers … [and] by 1840, it was transmitting almost 39 million newspapers . . . .” (John, 2000) Generally, newspapers were read as people gathered in groups at the post office, so the printed news reached even more people than these statistics would indicate.

The government also provided free copies of all newspapers to newspaper editors, who depended on it for much of what they printed. Newspapers were considered critical to an informed society. Even as the telegraph enabled greater and faster communication, the newspaper remained important as the nation expanded westward. (John, 2000)

*Current Status of Print Newspapers*

From the mid- to late-20\textsuperscript{th} century, newspaper readership declined in the U.S. The table below gives selected figures as compiled by the Newspaper Association of America as a part of their Newspaper Audience Database.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Avg. Weekday Readership (Adults)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recent research on where Americans get their news showed the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
<th>Non-Internet Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local TV</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National TV</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local paper</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National paper</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These are some disheartening statistics for the newspaper industry. Clearly, since the 1960’s other media such as television, radio, and the Internet have competed with newspapers in providing information to U.S. citizens. Yet another source shows a decrease in circulation along with the increase in population since 1950:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.S. Population</th>
<th># Daily Papers</th>
<th>Total Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>151 million</td>
<td>1,772</td>
<td>53.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>203 million</td>
<td>1,748</td>
<td>62.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>249 million</td>
<td>1,611</td>
<td>62.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>292 million</td>
<td>1,457</td>
<td>55.1 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In October 1999, the Readership Initiative was established to determine if the decline in readership over the past 30 years could be reversed. It is a multi-year, multi-million dollar research project focused on the primary question, “What makes people read newspapers?” (Stepp, 2003/2004)

The study surveyed 37,000 readers of 100 U.S. newspapers of various sizes. The report dated April 2001 entitled “The Power to Grow Readership: Research from the Impact Study of Newspaper Readership” outlined the reasons for the research; included
eight “imperatives” to improve readership; listed the newspapers surveyed; and the 88-question survey itself. Key findings included:

- The paper should be easy to read and use
- Readers like local-local news
- Readers like feature-style writing
- Service is extremely important
- Need to increase number of African American and Hispanic readers, and those under 40 (Stepp, 2003/2004)

Particularly interesting are readers’ desire for very local and personal stories, and the need to reach African Americans, Hispanics, and the under-40 population. Since the initial report, a number of newspapers have apparently taken heed of the survey results and made some changes to increase circulation.

The Newspaper’s Role in the Current Media Ecology

In the 20th century, publicly owned corporations increasingly purchased newspapers.

By 2000, newspapers were juggling priorities: fragmentation of news consumption, fragmentation of advertising investments, the advantages and disadvantages of being a mass medium, balancing the wants of the marketplace with the company’s duty to provide the needs of the marketplace, a journalistic backlash against industry changes, the sheer physicality of ink-on-paper production and distribution versus digital distribution . . . .

(www.newspaper-industry.org/history)
Internet newspapers have competed with, and worked alongside, Internet newspapers since the mid-1990’s. An Internet newspaper has the advantages of ease of use by the technically savvy, and its news can be delivered and updated immediately. The newspaper industry had some concern about declining circulation due to Internet newspapers, but a recent study indicates that Internet newspapers had only a small effect on print newspapers. “During 1995 to 2000, the readership of the Internet newspapers grew exponentially; while the newspaper circulation showed a decline trend, the degree of decline was far from remarkable. . . consumers did not abandon print newspapers.” (Cao & Li, 2006)

The reasons given by the authors of this study were that readers of Internet newspapers also tended to read print newspapers; print newspapers are more accessible to most people; Internet newspapers often basically duplicated their print version; and many other news sites on the Internet (such as MSN, CNN, etc.) compete with the Internet newspaper for online readers.

*Conclusion*

Early in the 21st century, Americans are able to obtain news from various sources such as print newspapers, radio, broadcast and cable television, talk shows, Internet newspapers, Internet blogs, and Internet news sites. Our nation was founded on democratic ideals and Americans still believe in each individual having an equal say in our government and in our organizations.

In order to have this “say”, we need to be educated on what our federal, state, and local government leaders are doing, the legislative policies that are being set, and the rules coming down from the courts. We also need to know what is taking place in the
nation and the world on a daily basis, how events impact our lives, and how the way we live impacts others. In this environment, print and Internet newspapers remain an important technology for the well-informed citizen.

The biggest challenge for the individual is having the ability—daresay wisdom--to decipher fact from almost-fact from true fiction in all types of our news media. In order to be a truly informed citizen in a democracy, a person must make the time to “hear” all sides of an issue, to bring experience and understanding to bear on them, and make decisions in a timely manner. With the polarizing effect of much of our media, becoming a truly well-informed citizen is certainly not an easy task, nor is it for the politically squeamish. But it is necessary for our democracy to survive.
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