

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

Data Literacy

This month's "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on the importance of data literacy. The current COVID-19 pandemic has flooded our media with many sources of information. Things are changing daily, and these constant changes can be difficult to navigate and evaluate. Erricka Hager and Bee Schindler, community engagement coordinators with CTSI, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, spoke about this topic.



ESTHER BUSH

BS: Good afternoon, Ms. Bush. I'm looking forward to discussing today's topic with you. I've noticed that education holds a special space in your heart. I'm curious to hear your thoughts on how communities can learn how to better understand the data they encounter. The daily news system and the way we access data certainly are changing.

EB: They surely are, Bee. And many of these changes are having a negative influence specifically on Black and Brown communities' understanding of information. Currently, our readers are getting news, rumors and opinions coming at them from a variety of sources. This content includes data that is informative and true and information that is false. Sifting through this information can be both frustrating and confusing. Our readers need tools to sort through the data storm on this pandemic.

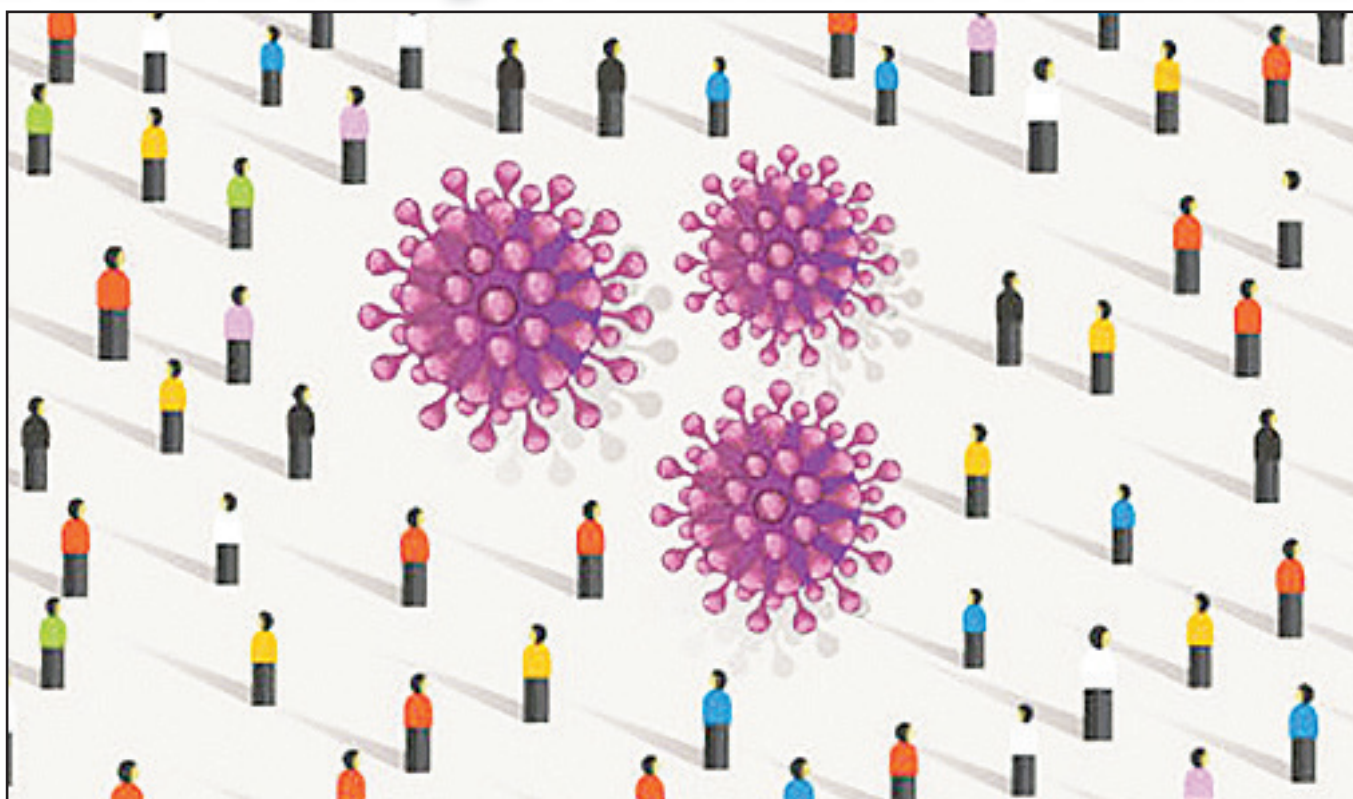
EH: Yes, Ms. Bush. Even as a public health professional, I find the constant stream of data to be somewhat overwhelming. I'm sure our readers are noticing an uptick in misinformation being shared across multiple platforms. I agree that our readers need the necessary tools to help move through all of the data, especially about COVID-19. Elizabeth Monk, research specialist in the Urban and Regional Analysis Program with the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research, shared a few tools that are available for our readers to improve their data literacy skills. What are some other tools that our readers can access?

BS: Aside from the resources shared elsewhere on this page, there is another local resource available to our readers. The Pennsylvania Health Literacy Coalition focuses on empowering communities to understand health information. Health literacy is defined as the ability to find, understand, evaluate, communicate and use health information to make informed decisions about your health. The coalition has materials and resources available for community members to help determine whether or not health information is valid.

EH: That's a great resource, Bee. For some people, the constant stream of COVID-19 information is easy to understand and navigate. But for others, seeing the increasing numbers may be scary and confusing. I'm also worried about the folks who have limited access to any credible information at all. These folks often look in magazines, newspapers or social media platforms for information. Data literacy skills are necessary for evaluating the risks and benefits of health-related decisions and information.

BS: Simply put, improving data literacy enables communities to seek accurate health information. It will also empower folks to "Take Charge of Their Health," a skill critical in minoritized communities where the dominant lens might otherwise not provide the tools to disentangle the data.

EB: Thank you so much for your time and thoughts, Bee and Erricka. As usual, we have continued to provide our readers with the necessary resources to help them understand the information they find online. I look forward to hearing your thoughts next month as we discuss caring during COVID-19. I'm sure the "Take Charge" page will be filled with valuable information for many of our community members.



Knowing how to use data

We live in a time when information is easy to access. Newspapers, online news sources and social media contribute to a near-constant stream of data—like numbers, charts and graphs. But because we see a chart, do we understand it? Do we trust the source? How well do we understand the meanings behind this data and how to use it? The ability to do so is called data literacy.

Specifically, data literacy "includes the ability to read, work with, analyze and argue with data as a part of a larger questioning process," says Elizabeth Monk, research specialist in the Urban and Regional Analysis Program with the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research. "It involves knowing how to use data to better inform your questions and how to better understand the sources of data."

Data literacy is important because decisions are made every day based on collected information. These decisions affect everyone. Government offices make policy decisions based on data—like where to allocate budget dollars, how to respond to crises or even how to make public transportation decisions. Decisions about schools, health care and human-service funding are influenced by data. For example, the 2020 Decennial U.S. Census collects data from all of us to determine the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives and is also used to distribute hundreds of billions of dollars in federal funds to local communities.

Also important to data literacy, according to Ms. Monk, is knowing that data is not neutral. This means that humans make decisions about data collection—defining the terms by which data is characterized, how to analyze it and how the data is visualized. "There are decisions baked into how data is collected—or what data is not collected—and displayed through the whole life cycle of a data set," she says. "Data always needs context. Understanding data and feeling confident to ask questions about it are important."

To that end, leaders in Black and Brown Pittsburgh-area communities are concerned that the data on the breakdown of local COVID-19 cases by race or neighborhood



Elizabeth Monk

is incomplete. A few states have released such data, which shows that Black communities are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Having this data will allow these states to pinpoint communities that need more resources to protect people. (See PublicSource's report here: publicsource.org/while-black-americans-are-disproportionately-dying-of-covid-19-allegany-county-and-pa-lack-local-race-data/.)

Data literacy helps boost transparency, economic development, civic engagement and advocacy. But should people with the power to make decisions about everyday life be the only ones who are data literate? Knowing where data comes from, how it is collected and how it is analyzed are all essential elements of data literacy.

Because of certain barriers—like internet access, confidence with technology, etc.—not everyone is data literate. Fortunately, different people and organizations in the area are teaching and promoting data literacy. One organization, Pitt's Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center (with which Ms. Monk also works), supports key community initiatives by making public information easier to find and use. The Data Center partnered with the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh to create Data 101, an introductory workshop series designed for people who want to get started on their journey toward data literacy. The workshops were open to the public and inclusive, offered in several branch libraries, including East Liberty and Knoxville. The Data 101 Toolkit (available online: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1VbftQ80nkaVg87ttPqH-4bxsJzBROBSy1VdvOCu_hoPO/edit) is an expansion of these workshops.

The Data Center also holds monthly office hours that are open to the public and available to people who need help with accessing data (schedule available online: wprdc.org/news/civic-data-virtual-click-office-hours/).

Ms. Monk also emphasizes the importance of data literacy. "There's so much access to data these days, and it has gotten easier for anyone to make data visualizations (charts, graphs, etc.)," she says. "If you're looking at visualizations without a clear source, which happens a lot, that's a red flag. Being able to determine which data sources are trustworthy is an incredible skill to have right now."

Lunch & Learn Series: Data and Digital Literacy: Understanding the gaps; taking action



May 7, 2020, 12 pm - 1 pm

Webinar Format: Zoom

RSVPs: Register in advance for this meeting here:

<https://pitt.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJYsdOquqjvHd-DkA1cAMSxbZ-J-SC8xx5X>

This month's health topic will be data and digital literacy. Specifically, we are hoping to discuss ways that times of trauma and uncertainty reveals data and digital literacy disparities and highlights the knowledge translation gap.

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UrbanKind Institute's CEO and Founder Jamil Bey, PhD, will present the importance of data literacy as it falls in line with what the UrbanKind Institute calls a think-and-do tank. UrbanKind's work spans several areas, including: education, environment, housing, jobs, neighborhoods, public safety, and transportation.

The Clinical and Translational Science Institute at the University of Pittsburgh partners with the **Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh** and **UPMC** and puts together the **Take Charge of Your Health** page in the **New Pittsburgh Courier** monthly. Our goal with the lunch and learn series is to lift up the community voice alongside the academics presenting their work in the space. We hope to create opportunities to co-create and co-learn around a health topic that is relevant.

