Warriors, allies or spectators: a look at stakeholders' perception of the role of libraries and librarians in the fake news phenomenon

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Abstract

The recent debate on fake news and critical thinking is invading the national and international scene. Strategies to counterfeit the phenomenon are issued everywhere: IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) built a campaign around its infographic tool; at the same time, the Internet giants are beginning to change their attitude and position with respect to fake news as a result of public pressure – e.g. Facebook and the scandal of Cambridge Analytica.

Libraries and librarians think they could play an important role, being their job about knowledge and information management, but does anyone else think along the same lines? An article published on Science *with the explicit goal of starting a "science of fake news", advocated an interdisciplinary approach, yet hardly any reference was made to Library and Information studies. The same happened in the recent EU* Public consultation on fake news and online disinformation - *neither libraries nor schools were counted among the stakeholders. Someone may argue that news is outside the scope of the library mission; yet preserving documentation and helping people to find and evaluate information effectively definitely is: the actions undertaken by EBLIDA (European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation) advocate for a role for libraries. Based on this scenario, the present paper will reflect on the concept of fake news in the light of library and information science – thus defining the field and its limits. Subsequently, it will analyse policy documents addressing the issue, to verify whether libraries and library studies are considered stakeholders by external observers.*

Method: documents on Fake News will be scanned looking for mentions of libraries on the websites of European Union, USA, Canada, Great Britain and Italy. An overall scan will also be carried out on the role of libraries in relation to fake news in research articles.

Keywords: Fake news, Library mission, Libraries in public perception, Information behavior, Information ethics

Type of Contribution: Paper

Conference subtheme to which it relates most directly: Social roles of information institutions

The background and purpose of the study.

On Nov 13, the local TV News in Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy, ('Flash Mob dei giornalisti in difesa della libertà di stampa', 2018) reported that, as part of a nation-wide initiative, local journalists enacted a flash mob to defend the freedom of the press, in response to two politicians who had recently defined these professionals as "*worthless chacals, 'pen-sellers', prostitutes*". The spokesman maintained that, though some might consider journalists redundant in the age of online communication, "*we think that now the role of those who professionally verify news and certify the sources is even more crucial.*"[1]. This rang a bell. Is this not what librarians do? Besides, Seife (2014) could add that one of the flaws of journalism in the frenetic digital age is that visibility and shareability rule their agenda, rather than accuracy.

This happened at a time when the present study was under way but added a brick to the construction of its meaning. The spokesman maintained that journalists are in charge of fact-checking - and they definitely should be. On the other hand, the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) seems to advocate to librarians a key role: both in the selection of collections and in the teaching of effective searching to library users. Yet Galluzzi (2014) shows that this role is not totally acknowledged in the press – which she rightly considers an expression of public perception.

The spark for the present study originated from the survey on public perception on Fake News (Tortola, 2017) led by the European Union Digital Single Market between November 2017 and February 2018, where libraries and schools were conspicuous among the stakeholders only for their absence. The initiative led the author to a reflection on the role of library field in this debate, reinforced in March 2018 by an article (Lazer et al., 2018) advocating an inter-disciplinary effort to create a "Science of Fake News" where, once more, the LIS field was not mentioned. Librarians' perception of their role did not align with the perception of the community at large. This realization prompted the current investigation on: how libraries perceive themselves and how – (or if) are they perceived from the outside in the Fake News debate?

Details of the methods, procedures and instruments used.

To address the questions, the present study will pursue three lines of investigation:
- Scanning current literature for a definition of the concept of Fake News;
- Analysing the literature on libraries' perception of themselves in this respect;
- Examining documentation from governmental and supra-governmental sources - among them IFLA, EBLIDA and the European Union.

The results of the investigation will be read in the light of IFLA Code of Ethics.

The search in academic literature for the first two lines of investigation was carried out easily, both on specialised databases and on general search engines.

On the contrary, finding official government sources that defined actual actions undertaken by various states to tackle the issue was challenging. We were looking for digital agendas, policies, proposed or passed bills, that made reference to the issue of Fake News or to the informed use of digital information. The intention was to provide a snapshot of the current actions undertaken by different European nations. However, the language barrier limited the scope of this investigation to English, French, Italian. Though most parliamentary or governmental portals dedicate space to digital agendas, identifying the responsible departments, the fact that the situation varied greatly from one country to the other (e.g. from Education to Commerce) was another challenge.

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[1] Translations from Italian by the author.

Another issue was that it was even less easy to find information about policies specifically aimed at Fake news: they might be included in documents on political disinformation, digital agendas, specific government actions – and sometimes those issues are treated from a different angle (e.g. connectivity).

For the purpose of this phase of the study, the decision was made to examine mainly documents from the European Union. The international perspective included library-focused international organisations such as IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations) and EBLIDA (European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations).

The geographic scope was limited to four countries: Great Britain and USA, because much of the recent evidence and comment emanates from those countries (Lor, 2018), Canada and Italy, being the countries of the author and contributor of the paper.

□Findings, discussion.

Literature review on Fake News.

The literature on Fake News is abundant and interdisciplinary, yet the document analysis uncovered some of the following common threads.

Firstly, the phenomenon, considered part of the broader concept of "post-truth", is not new (Cooke, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Lor, 2018; Reilly, 2018; Rochlin, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). What is new is its context in a social media environment and its evolving meaning. Since 2016, a time when the Oxford English Dictionary chose "Post-truth" as word of the year as a result of political issues surrounding the Leave campaign in the UK and the presidential election in the USA, research in the area of fake news has increased significantly.

Secondly, the social dimension is extremely meaningful. We live in a post-truth era "*in which audiences are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotions or existing personal beliefs, as opposed to seeking and readily accepting information regarded as factual or objective*" (Cooke, 2017, p. 212). The idea of truth therefore turns from a factual correspondence to a social agreement (Anthony, 2018; Lorusso, 2018). Fake news *per se* would be of little consequence without reactions, that is "*fake news needs the nourishment of troubled times in order to take root*" (Tandoc, et al., 2018, p.149).

The third thread is money. Clickbait is a source for revenue, the more outrageous the stories, the more successful they are: in a social environment, the emotional involvement is stronger than the rational judgement. See the case of BuzzFeed News tracing a group of liberal and conservative websites back to the same company (Silverman, 2017), or of the Macedonian village fabricating stories on Donald Trump (Kirby, 2016). The effects of news fabrication are maximised by news bots.

The fourth thread is authority: Web 2.0 allowed citizen journalism to challenge the authority of journalists. Besides, it blurred the concept of information source, as news can be reached via the newspaper website but more often via social media. Receiving stories posted by socially trusted sources changes the bias of the receiver, who is prejudiced in their favour. "*Popularity on social media is thus a self-fulfilling cycle*" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 139), this is why fact-checking might be counterproductive under certain circumstances (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1095) and the only defence is to refuse to react to fabricated stories, as each "click" on Facebook turns into an endorsement (Rochlin, 2017, p. 390).

This short framework is enough to understand the complexity of the problem. There is not one simple solution, yet strategies are needed. Literature points to two directions, that is: automatising the detection of deceptive pieces of information – in other words using the same weapons that create misinformation to fight it – or empowering individuals. More precisely, these two options

should be adopted jointly: while the first one calls into action the Internet giants and platforms, the second one is where libraries could and should be involved.

In LIS literature, the issue is so prominent that the ALA Reference and user Services Association dedicated it a special issue (2018). The role of libraries and librarians is advocated mostly in two directions: on the one hand as providers of trusted, balanced, reliable collections offering diverse viewpoints, and on the other as educators, often in association with schools, universities and other educational institutions. The digital dimension is implied in both functions, as collections are both in analogic and digital format. Moreover, libraries often mediate free web resources to their users. The two tasks are in line with IFLA Code of Ethics and, even earlier, they comply with Ranganathan's five principles (Ranganathan, 1931). Libraries manage and organise collections and make them available to their users; when the collections go online, libraries follow suit.

LIS literature moves from the analysis of the general fake news debate. Lor (2018) states that "*the post-truth phenomenon is [...] a problem of contemporary social epistemology*", whose nature is social and emotional more than individual and cognitive, and determines the continuing existence of democracy. Libraries, in his opinion, are not in the same race as journalists and social media experts; their value lies in the historical view. Therefore, libraries need to review their role in the light of information and democracy, work with other partners, exert their soft power as trusted institutions with a long-term constancy opposed to the ever-shifting current information ecosystem, and offer a space, a secure haven for everyone.

Most library literature demonstrates that librarians are aware of the issue, they feel involved, think they need to act in a network with other stakeholders, who are mostly identified with the institutions they serve, be they universities, municipalities, states, schools.

Perception of libraries in official sources.

The first finding was that a thorough search requires more time and a cross-country collaboration, to overcome both the language and the cultural barriers.

The European Commission produced many documents on the matter (European Commission, 2018b), the following is a summary of the trends uncovered in these documents.

Fake news and disinformation are issues influencing political life and endangering democracy, as an increasing part of the population – especially the younger – draw their information from the Internet. A recent Eurobarometer opinion poll in all 28 Member States found that 72% of respondents use the Internet to access news more than once a week (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, 2016). The EU perspective is much focused on the internet platforms, seen both as problem and counterpart for the solution. Moreover, policies point at addressing the challenges posed by cybersecurity and the protection of identity, developing digital skills for the job market, encouraging active citizenship and enhancing connectivity.

The Digital Education Action Plan (European Commission, 2018a) envisages actions to be taken to regulate Internet platforms and providers, create fact-checking sources, increase connectivity and raise awareness and digital skills through education. Both schools (coding and cybersecurity classes, access to technology) and higher education (Open Science) are perceived as stakeholders in this respect. Libraries are not mentioned directly, except for academic libraries, listed among other campus services. Yet, if schools and universities are involved, their libraries follow necessarily, and public libraries could be implied where the Plan states that the acquisition of digital skills can happen also "*through after-school classes*" (European Commission, 2018a, p. 5). Policies correspond to values at the core of the library profession, an impression confirmed by a report advising education ministries that they "*work with libraries.* […] [to] *ensure communities*

can access both online and offline news and digital literacy materials via their local libraries."
(Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 84).

The EU efforts are echoed by EBLIDA (2018) reporting about the EU survey on public perception (Tortola, 2017), which aimed at assessing the citizens' opinion on the role of various stakeholders to counter the spread of fake information online. The consultation closed in February 2018, and a High Level Group (HLG) on fake news and online disinformation met the first time in January 2018. Their Report (EC, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, & High Level Group, 2018), according to EBLIDA, "*highlights that libraries can play a role in literacy competence, especially in media and information literacy.*". The report actually does envisage media literacy as a solution to counter spread and power of Fake News. As it says, the EU should work "*with the aim of integrating critical media literacy into the core literacies guaranteed to all schoolchildren in Europe, with formal status in national school curricula. This can engage libraries as well.*" (European Commission et al., 2018, p. 27). This is the only occurrence of the word "librar*" in the report, yet an indirect reference may be found in the statement that "*It should however be for independent (educational) institutions to provide the content of any media and information literacy programmes*" a view in line with most LIS literature. Besides, a reference is made to an inquiry on media literacy (European Audiovisual Observatory for the European Commission, 2016) listing actions undertaken in the 28 EU countries, where libraries are mentioned several times.

Among the 39 expert members of the group - chosen across professions and organizations – there are no libraries, librarians or LIS experts: scholars are mostly from the field of communication studies, journalism and Internet expertise. The call for the Group was open, so the absence of LIS professionals might mean either an oversight from the field, or that librarians were not chosen.

Back to EBLIDA, it celebrated its 25th anniversary with the Aarhus declaration, stating "*We call upon the [...] governments of Europe to [...] promote and support strong reading and critical thinking competencies through libraries in a time of fake-news and information overload.*"('EBLIDA Aarhus Declaration', 2017).

A look at countries: UK, Canada, US and Italy.

The situation in the individual countries is very varied. The UK is very active. The Culture, Media and Sports Committee of the House of Commons recently published its Fifth Report (Great Britain. Grand Committee, 2018) on the issue. The focus is on the tendency of people to use social networks for information purposes and the resulting spread of fake news, in the light of social and political issues (e.g. Russia, the Leave campaign), nevertheless it recommends that the government put forward an "*educational framework (developed by charities and non-governmental organisations) and based online. Digital literacy should be the fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths.*" (Great Britain. Grand Committee, 2018, p. 63). A remarkable point is made in this report regarding the definition issue: they recommend that "fake news" be replaced by "misinformation" and "disinformation", as it has become ambiguous to the point of "*including a description of any statement that is not liked or agreed with by the reader.*". "*With [...] a shared definition, and clear guidelines [...] there will be a shared consistency of meaning across the platforms.*" (Great Britain. Grand Committee, 2018, p. 64). The Government defines *"disinformation as the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain. 'Misinformation' refers to the inadvertent sharing of false information."* (Great Britain. HM Government, 2018, p. 2). Much reference is made to the "platforms" - Facebook being prominent - to be held liable for their actions and to pay for the education framework. The advice is that *"Facebook and other*

social media companies should not be in a position of 'marking their own homework'". (Great Britain. Grand Committee, 2018, p. 67).

In Canada the issue seems to be under the responsibility of the Canadian Heritage Minister Melanie Joly, who envisions *"partnerships between social media networks and media literacy organizations as part of the solution to the misinformation problem, rather than government intervention"* (Garber, 2018). Though aware that the issue needs networking, plans do not seem to involve libraries, whose mission is rather to be focused on preservation and access to the collections. The issue in Canada seems to be connectivity rather than evaluation.

For the USA, the search for "fake news" in the portal https://www.usa.gov/ returned some Congress bills in response to President Trump's public statements which were deemed false. The query "digital literacy" retrieved https://digitalliteracy.gov, a portal going back to the Obama administration.

In Italy, the present digital agenda seems to be concentrating on the transformation of the Public administration. The sections of the Agency for the Digital Agenda dedicated to competencies are focused on the job market and the ICT professions, and no reference is made to educational strategic plans. On the other hand, the Ministry for Education (MIUR) started a National Plan for Digital School ('La scuola digitale - MIUR', n.d.) in 2016, under the previous Government but still operating, where libraries are definitely present – see, as an example, action #24 for Innovative School Libraries ('Biblioteche Scolastiche Innovative - MIUR', n.d.).

Completely different is the contribution of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, one of the stakeholders of the Agenda for the Millennium Goals, working relentlessly on advocating for libraries. Through its Global Vision, IFLA it is striving to become the global voice of libraries, and to do this it is collecting ideas from libraries and librarians around the world in its Idea Store. The specific action dedicated to Fake News ('IFLA - - Real Solutions to Fake News: How Libraries Help') produced an infographic ('IFLA -- How To Spot Fake News') which has been translated into 39 languages.

☐Conclusions.

The literature examined proves that the libraries' perception of their role in the post-truth debate is not widely echoed in the way they are mentioned in official documents.

Libraries feel they can play an active role in the fake news and post-truth debate, both as curators of information and as educators to critical thinking, to foster the development of democratic societies. In the literature, they mostly refer to their relations to their parent institutions, not to Internet platforms, journalists and only partially to publishers.

On the other hand, the documents produced by governmental and supra-national sources show that libraries are not perceived as stakeholders in the post-truth debate, at the best we could say they are taken for granted as part of their parent institutions.

Rather, official documents show an attention to media producers and to the Internet platforms - even letting them "mark their own homework" (Great Britain. Grand Committee, 2018).

Marchionini (2018) maintains that, even in the world of Big Data, democracy is being killed not by lack of information, but by too much information. Data curation adds value to data, LIS scientists are the bridge between data and knowledge. To be more effective, the action should be carried out in collaboration with subject experts, who are not involved in the same ethical choices around data curation that directly involve libraries.

Libraries are definitely too slow for the present informational ecosystem, but we can agree with Lor (2018) that they are valuable to preserve democracy because *"as librarians strive to keep at the forefront technologically, to a considerable extent they remain custodians and providers of slower moving but less ephemeral content. [...] Libraries provide continuing access to the*

records of our time. As a non-partisan space, a bit boring perhaps, but trustworthy, the library provides a space for reflection, a haven for civility and rationality, and a home for contrarian thinkers." Someone might argue that librarians are not involved in the news, but they definitely are in disinformation and misinformation. Rejection of negationist attitudes (no-vax, creationism a.s.o.) needs an historical perspective.

Yet advocacy – what IFLA does – is needed to make libraries visible. In the meantime, libraries should network among themselves and with other stakeholders – schools, universities, journalists, historians but also with internet platforms and the economic institutions – not to save themselves but simply to empower people to be aware of the quality of information in order – to quote Lazer et al. (2018) - *"to promote interdisciplinary research to reduce the spread of fake news and to address the underlying pathologies it has revealed".*

In the frenzy of the present fast-moving informational ecosystem, libraries help people remember. The consequences of a forgetful society have been depicted in dystopian masterpieces of a past when democracy was less taken for granted: erasing the past to feed people with a fabricated story continuously rewritten (Bradbury, 1953; Orwell, 1949), depriving individuals of social cohesion to suit the power of the government (Huxley, 1932). Of course, Oceania, the World State and the America in Fahrenheit 451 are mere figments of the imagination, yet those books still teach us a lesson, even if they are not ranked within the top ten in web searches, and libraries still make them available. Together with other sources and through the mediation of librarians, they allow the citizens who still want to know to confront the present issues with the solutions humanity found in the past.

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