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'Fake News' and Information Literacy

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Similar to how there is no structured definition of 'neutrality' in libraries, (Scott & Sanders, 2021), there is also no universally agreed-upon definition for 'Fake News' (Dahri & Richard, 2018). Mis-information and dis-information are the two most important and applicable cognitive dimensions of behavior for 'Fake News' (Cooke, 2018). To better understand and define 'Fake News,' it is important to understand the differences between mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information. Mis-information is "false information created without intention to cause harm,", dis-information is "false information created with the intention to cause harm," and mal-information is "factual information leaked and shared to cause harm" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Researchers Dahri & Richard (2018) conducted a case study to further elaborate the lack of this universal definition, the simplicity behind creating 'Fake News,' and how this negatively impacts readers by conducting a series of engaging information literacy exercises. Interestingly, in the case study Dahri & Richard (2018) most closely relate and define 'Fake News' as mis-information, and not dis-information, leading to another discrepancy in solidifying any definition. However, defining 'Fake News' as "mis-information" or "dis-information" is not an end point of the concept, but a starting point. Depending on the type of information, opinion of a reader, and method of communication, 'Fake News' could easily fall into all three cognitive dimensions of behavior for 'Fake News'.

Not only does the American Library Association (ALA) fail to emphasize how 'neutrality' fits into librarianship, but they also fail to describe how 'Fake News' fits as well. Respondents from the Scott & Sanders study agree that 'neutrality' has a place in librarianship, and is best defined as "being objective in providing information" (Scott & Sanders, 2021).

Instead, the ALA values intellectual freedom and "the right of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Intellectual freedom is one of the core values of the library profession; it promotes access to information and guides the defense against censorship" (ALA, 2017). The problem is that the ALA's value of intellectual freedom (as opposed to 'neutrality') and principles of the Library Bill of Rights (ALA, 2009) do not pose a threat to the censorship of 'Fake News', especially when its definition remains unclear. As seen in the ALA First Amendment and Censorship document, "[o]nly that expression that is shown to belong to a few narrow categories of speech is not protected by the First Amendment. The categories of unprotected speech include obscenity, child pornography, defamatory speech, false advertising, true threats, and fighting words" (ALA, 2021). The First Amendment continues to provide protection for people who promulgate 'Fake News.' Therefore, despite lack of a definition, librarians clearly value neutrality and objective information, and are put in a precarious position regarding how they respond to 'Fake News' in resource curation and information literacy instruction - especially when librarians also value the fundamental philosophies of intellectual freedom provided by the ALA. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to value intellectual freedom while also offering professional reference judgment when the resources presented contain objectively false information.

The purpose of this paper is to further explore the mixed feelings surrounding the censorship of 'Fake News' within librarianship. Specifically, it aims to explore the importance of proper identification of false information in information literacy instruction, and the role librarians play as educators. Library users and librarians will continue to encounter resources considered as 'Fake News.' The current information environment is "confusing," and librarians are in a "prime position" to develop the skills necessary to help users navigate and make

educated decisions when accessing information (Goodsett and Schmillen, 2022). This paper suggests how to best implement 'Fake News' identification and evaluation into the role of the librarians as information literacy instructors, as well as three modes of assessments adapted to demonstrate how 'Fake News' identification and evaluation practices could be improved in the future.

Librarians as Information Literacy Educators

While it has been libraries' responsibility to instruct patrons on information retrieval and evaluation techniques for years, the term "information literacy" was only first coined by Paul G. Zurkowski in 1974 as a response to information overload, which might occur "whenever available information exceeds our ability to evaluate it" (Zurkowski, 1974). According to the ALA, "[l]ibrarians are uniquely qualified to teach the information literacy skills that are paramount in a knowledge-based economy" (ALA, 2011). In order to have demonstrable information literacy skills, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed, and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use it effectively (ALA, 2006). This definition is the building block of various guidelines and methods surrounding information literacy instruction. Since then, the amount and variety of information has increased from 1989 to 1998, proving that librarians are vital figures at the forefront of information literacy and information literacy instruction (ALA, 2006).

Since the 1998 update, the amount and variety of resources has only increased, placing more emphasis on relevant information literacy skills and instruction. Thankfully, librarians are in a prime position to help students develop the skills necessary for navigating this confusing information environment (Goodsett & Schillmen, 2022). Despite this, propaganda,

disinformation, and the extrapolation of mis-information have been recognized "since antiquity" (Valenti and Lund, 2021). 'Fake News' is a dated concept that has been seen for generations, only changing in the content and growing forms of resources available.

Universal acceptance and use of social media platforms has resulted in over-confident individuals who believe their own thoughts or interpretation of information is factual, further introducing new concerns that can produce misleading and/or false information (Valenti and Lund, 2021). In addition, library users and information seekers continue to grow in self-sufficiency, and are accustomed to accessing online resources and making their own reference judgments (Hirsh, 2018). This is a double-edged sword - on one hand, more and more users are capable of accessing materials of information to further educate themselves; on the other hand, this easily-accessible information may not be the reliable choice. This can be challenging for librarians as they are encouraged to value the ALA's current support for intellectual freedom (including support of false-information) while also teaching users to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. The need for reliable content and resources correlates with the need to determine the quality, value, and validity of information. Indeed, the belief that more "expansive support is possible for librarians and information specialists in promoting the determination and use of validated facts," is also shared by professional librarian educators (Crowley, 2019). While most librarians would like to be neutral and objective when providing information (Scott & Sanders, 2021), current ALA information literacy practices suggest a lack of censorship in regards to 'Fake News.' Censoring 'Fake News' is an extreme response the ALA could make to combat further distribution of misinformation. However, like neutrality, the ALA should recognize it as an issue within library discourse that should be addressed, especially in regards to information literacy.

Existing Information Literacy Methods/Guidelines that Should Address 'Fake News'

Information literacy instruction is needed to properly educate individuals how to locate, evaluate, and use information effectively. While information literacy instruction has embraced self-sufficiency of its users, it also needs to consider how 'Fake News' plays into its models and guidelines. Notable existing information literacy related models/guidelines include: the ALA Framework for Information Literacy document, which allows for the focus of new attention on the changing information ecosystem when updated in 2012 (ALA, 2016), the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Seven Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians document which intends to continue to serve as a bridge to the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* document (ALA, 2017), and an information literacy instructional method known as the Big6 aimed at teaching information literacy to students grades K-12 (Wolf, 2003). These methods/guidelines emerged as critical and official responses to the pressing need of the "Information Age," and the need to combat information overload and avoid disinformation (Valenti & Lund, 2021). However, none of these models or guidelines mention 'Fake News,' or provide any guidance with how to grapple with false information - only the overload of general information. Librarians and information seekers would benefit from the inclusion of 'Fake News' into models and guidelines listed in order to improve information literacy and information literacy instruction. It is equally important to ensure that the term is embedded into modern MLIS curriculum so librarians are able to provide relevant information literacy instruction in the "Post-Truth Era," an information environment that has only gotten worse and harder to navigate

with 'Fake News,' posing real threats with incorrect evaluation and usage (Cooke, 2018).

However, while censorship would be a positive step forward, incorporation of the term in

information literacy models and guidelines is not enough. Continued assessment of information

literacy and information literacy instruction is required to ensure that information literacy

instruction meets the needs of its users.

Adapting Assessments of Information Literacy and Information Literacy Instruction to

Include 'Fake News'

Todd Gilman in Chapter 7 of *Information Services Today: An Introduction* (Learning and

Research Institutions), discusses assessment in an academic setting as a process used by libraries

to learn more about the needs of their users to improve academic programs, curriculum, student

learning, and the library's role in research activities of students and faculty. Assessment usually

leads to a plan with specific, measurable, and agreed upon outcomes (Hirsch, 2018).

Assessments are also conducted as library marketing and outreach strategies, with the goal of

demonstrating the value of a particular element of a library's collection and services to

stakeholders (Hisrsh, 2018). Assessment is a valuable way to find out what works, and what

doesn't. Given the current information landscape, assessment of information literacy instruction

is of undoubtable interest to library professionals. It is only with proper assessment of current

information literacy practices that researchers and information organizations are able to

determine if their practices meet user needs. While there are many assessments of information

literacy instruction, the current assessments can only consider information literacy through the

lens, values, considerations, and philosophical lens of the ALA. Current information literacy

assessment is quite thorough, two particularly completing assessments will be shared, and

adapted to include 'Fake News' as a means to demonstrate how that would better fit the needs of users in the current information environment. These adaptations will also be suggested having considered the "Fake News', modifications to existing information literacy methods guidelines discussed earlier.

1. *Assessment of the Quality of Current MLIS Education in Preparing Students for ACRL Guidelines*

   Researchers Valenti & Lund (2021) argue that the quality of information literacy instruction starts with our educators. They talked about this disconnect between MLIS education and functional librarian responsibilities. To determine how current masters-level coursework addresses education and instruction for future professional librarians, the researchers used content analysis methods to examine course titles and descriptions published online by ALA accredited programs. They wanted to find out if the discrepancy was evident in the course outlines themselves. Course titles and descriptions were analyzed for instances of elements of the ACRL Seven Roles and Strengths of Teaching Librarians document. The researchers were able to determine if courses even addressed the document at all, and if elements from it were covered explicitly in course curricula. Interestingly, the study shows that of the courses reviewed, only three course titles reference the ACRL Roles and Strengths document by name. This factor alone implies that these professional competencies standards are not considered influential within the LIS instructional course curriculum. The study also points out that MLIS instructors may directly benefit from using this document as a pathway towards effective and beneficial instructional course content, and the infrequency of finding a profession that transparently outlines the competencies necessary to succeed in this profession. The researchers state humorously that it is

not often that a profession states so clearly what competencies it feels are important for professionals. Along with explicit roles and strengths stated within course titles and descriptions, it was through the emergence of themes related to the ACRL Roles and Strengths that the researchers were able to explore how well current MLIS educators address its contents.

It is clear from the assessment alone that MLIS educators should do a better job implementing the thorough guidelines for information literacy provided by the ALA into their curricula. Doing so would directly benefit the information literacy instructor, and therefore, the information seeker. Again, the researchers analyzed the place of the Roles and Strengths document, which acts as a bridge for the ALA Framework for Information Literacy document, in MLIS curricula. A study which analyzes the ALA Framework for Information Literacy document would be of primary importance in terms of improving how well librarians deliver information literacy. However, it would be interesting to see this assessment done again after the inclusion of 'Fake News,' into the methods/guidelines for information literacy, as suggested earlier. This modified assessment would give an equally eye opening perspective as to if MLIS educators are preparing their information professionals to handle questions and concerns surrounding Information Literacy more specifically, false information and 'Fake News.'

2. *Assessment the Relationship between Critical Thinking and Information Literacy*

On the other hand, Goodsett & Schmillen in *Fostering Critical Thinking in First-Year Students through Information Literacy Instruction* assessed the relationship between critical thinking and information literacy. Through a series of in-depth interviews, the researchers sought to understand how academic librarians who primarily instruct first-year college students conceive of, teach, and assess critical thinking skills in relation to information literacy. The

emergence of themes led to an understanding of the quality of the information literacy instruction, and how it relates to critical thinking. The study shares that in previous literature, the relationship between critical thinking and information is unclear. To explore this further, 21 academic librarians interviewed. Using a revised version of the protocol developed by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing that originally focused on Primary and Secondary school teachers, the researchers asked teaching librarians a series of questions to discover how first-year instruction librarians conceive of and use critical thinking in their teaching. Additionally, the researchers asked questions about participants' teaching experience, education, and other demographic information. Various speech analysis methods to determine themes among the responses. Like previous research, the exact relationship between critical thinking and information literacy is still unclear, however, many of this study's respondents associate critical thinking as an umbrella term that includes information literacy. The researchers discovered common library instruction methods for teaching critical thinking, determined how the participants perceive the relationship between critical thinking and information literacy, and identified areas for growth in library instruction programs hoping to collaborate with faculty in promoting critical thinking. The results should help academic librarians who teach first-year students better integrate critical thinking into their instruction and identify areas of study that require more research.

A similar study, one that assesses the relationship between 'Fake News' identification and evaluation as information literacy could be equally illuminating. Additionally, as this study mentions, perhaps this adapted study does not focus on exclusively first-year instruction to increase the sample size and explore other facets of information literacy instruction. The goal of this adapted study would be to explore librarians' attitudes toward 'Fake News', define the

perceived relationship between Fake News and information literacy, explore further the relationship between critical thinking and information literacy, and determine how academic librarians teach Fake News identification. In regards to information literacy and 'Fake News,' teaching users to consider location (where is this information coming from?), evaluation - (is this information credible?), usability - (should this information be used?), is unambiguously critical thinking, and information literacy in practice.Just as critical thinking was described as an umbrella term that includes information literacy in the study, information literacy can be an umbrella term that includes 'Fake News'. It should be noted that this type of assessment would hold more value after 'Fake News' is considered more thoughtfully into the existing information literacy methods/guidelines and MLIS education curricula so that future information professionals are prepared to teach 'Fake News' identification/awareness.

Conclusion:

It is clear 'Fake News' can, and should have a place in information literacy. Currently, it does not and it fails to be clarified by the ALA officially. The lack of clarity and agreed upon definition makes it difficult to implement the term. Afterall, it is the First Amendment right of individuals to promulgate 'Fake News', therefore, the ALA, valuing intellectual freedom, will continue to do so as well. Suggestions have been made for where 'Fake News' should be discussed within the official methods and guidelines for information literacy. Additionally, it was discovered how after implementation, assessment could be used to improve users information literacy skills, and the quality of information literacy instruction. With the term included in these methods/guidelines, MLIS curricula relevance and the critical thinking skills of information seekers would increase. Again, censorship of 'Fake News', until a larger threat is posed, is

unlikely. However, at the very least, the ALA should shed some light or clarify how 'Fake News' plays into librarianship and information literacy as this would be the best means of combating misinformation, disinformation, false information, and 'Fake News.' In fact, 'Fake News', its place in information literacy, critical thinking, as well as 'Fake News,' identification/metaliteracy exercises have been published by the ALA suggesting its inclusion is imminent. (Cooke, 2018). 'Fake News Identification exercises and workshops hosted by libraries, in fact, have also been discussed as solutions against false-information (Crowley, 2018). However, this does not come in the form of an official statement by the ALA. For many librarians this inclusion would be revealing, and for information seekers, desiring objective information, this would be beneficial.

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