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Identifying knowledge practices in an infodemic era: Rediscovering the professional identities of LIS professionals in an infodiverse environment

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Abstract

The professional identity of librarians is established with regard to the current understanding of their knowledge practices. The global phenomenon of false and untrustworthy information circulating on social media platforms paints a new issue that librarians must conquer. Messages, content, news, and information on the web make it challenging for librarians to educate users as to where the sources come from and the need to evaluate for credibility and trustworthiness. During the pandemic, and with a surge of information disorders on social media, the World Health Organization recommended building resilience to misinformation and engaging and empowering communities to take positive action. This research seeks to explore the relationship between professional identities and the participation of librarians in an infodiverse environment, specifically by exploring how Filipino librarians applied aspects of their knowledge practices to the evaluation of social media health information during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Asia, southeast; health literacy; infodemiology; library and information professionals; public health

INTRODUCTION

A public and society with low awareness of a librarian's social responsibility will continue to have slanted perceptions if the professional identity of librarians has not been

fully established in its community. Librarian practitioners as a professional group have a formal education and through professional development become competent individuals in their role of organising, disseminating, protecting, and preserving information. Yet, with the surge of infodiverse environment, and the infodemic, access to good quality health information is threatened. Inaccuracy of information can cause harm and threat if we are poorly or wrongly informed.

Infodiversity is defined by Morales Campos (2006) as 'the defence of the existence of multiple, diverse

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manifestations of information creation, which implies the convergence of different types of information'. Infodiversity refers to a variety of information source types, forms, or formats which acknowledges all expressions produced by different social groups over time through media dissemination (IFLA, 2021). Infodemic refers to 'overabundance of information, both good and bad' (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 1). This mix of data 'makes it hard for people in all walks of life to find clear messages, trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need these' (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 1). Solomon et al. (2020) describe infodemic as a 'contagious disease infecting our information culture'. Infodemic spreads fast in social media in various formats that poses danger or threat to anyone who cannot decipher reliable information. Consumers receive a multitude of health information coming from infodiverse platforms and formats that shapes public perception. The presence of infodiversity impacts the information field as producers of health information can unintentionally or intentionally create misinformation or disinformation (Hernández-Pérez, 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) believes that infodemic should be managed as it becomes a health information risk that disrupts communication. There should be a way to ensure that people receive the right medical and health information in the right time and right format (World Health Organization, 2021). As a result, infodemic management is a response to protect the integrity of a source against the 'harmful effects of misinformation and disinformation' (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 8). WHO emphasised that an infodemic which created false information can result to misinformation and disinformation and 'has been observed in local settings during many epidemics prior to the COVID-19 pandemic' (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 12).

The World Health Organization (n.d.) recommends good health practices through various activities, by listening to community concerns and questions, promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice, building resilience to misinformation, and engaging and empowering communities to take positive action. With the challenges presented by infodiversity and the associated infodemic, how then do library and information science (LIS) professionals position themselves in this new information landscape? Does it affect their daily work routine and professional identity? Professional identity starts when a professional 'develops knowledge, sets of skills, ways of being and values that approach being identical to those held by other members of the profession.' (Trede et al., 2012). One's profession provides an identity, having its own beliefs and norms as a guide to professional practice (Garcia & Barbour, 2018).

Infodiversity as a concept

In an interview with Jonathan Hernández-Pérez from the Institute for Library and Information Research (IIBI) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) on infodiversity (IFLA, 2021), Hernández-Pérez indicated that inequality and a monopoly of information in underdeveloped countries paved the way to the birth of infodiversity as a concept. There is a question of who controls the information, who prepared it, and how they were being transferred to younger generations. Is the flow of information one-sided? Hernández-Pérez introduced Estela Morales Campos as one of those LIS scholars who coined this concept (IFLA, 2021). In addition, Hernández-Pérez mentioned in the interview that infodiversity is a research area in Latin America as it started in Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Colombia, Peru, and Costa Rica. Indigenous peoples express themselves in many ways. Multiculturalism is a factor in how we understand and interpret the information about us—how it was produced, consumed, and shared. Eventually, the information needs to be preserved. There must also be an understanding of which media type or format are available, and who can access them. As a result, people have to identify if the information is freely available, for example, open access. As we extract information from various sources, how can we better analyse them based on our political, economic, social and technological context. As we move to the other side of the globe, infodiversity is now being explored in Asia, particularly in the Philippines where more than 100 indigenous tribes are currently present.

Librarians' professional identity

The study of professional identities among librarians has been explored by Pierson et al. (2020) focusing on the critical practices of professional identity development. The initial step for a practitioner is to be aware of their own professional identity, and perspectives that influenced their decision in engaging in professional practice and anticipating the next thing to do. Fraser-Arnott (2019) identified that the LIS profession is in transition and urged the need to re-evaluate librarians' professional identities. She identifies the move towards producing more digitization resources as playing a vital role in opening opportunities for Internet-savvy individuals. Fraser-Arnott also revealed that librarians' professional identity is a dynamic career and is greatly influenced by others through socialisation and alignment with professional colleagues. Pierson et al. (2019) identify 14 characteristics relevant to librarians' professional identity: primary identity; education and training; socialisation,

which is concurrent throughout development; self-claiming; early practice; professional status, values, and associations; critical incidents; experience and time; communication and ascription of meaning to practice; identity/place dichotomy; transferability; blurring; later practice; and perceptions including stereotypes.

Librarians' knowledge practices

Knowledge practices are directly related to how the infodemic can be addressed. Knowledge practice is the 'recurrent activities and learned ways of working with knowledge where knowledge should be understood in the broadest sense including that which is stated explicitly but also tacit or procedural knowledge' (Karlgren et al., 2020, p. 3). As librarians educate the public and its community, the backbone in this knowledge practice is information literacy. For instance, using the ACRL Framework *Authority Is Constructed and Contextual* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2023), librarians can teach their users how to critically evaluate various content that they encounter to be used not only in their academic life but for personal use as well (Faix & Fyn, 2020). Infodemic can be addressed using this critical evaluation framework to identify and evaluate whether an information source is credible or not. Information disorders are 'a new conceptual framework for analysing information pollution' and is a collective term that may contain misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation (Cooper, 2021). These three categories are the common problems librarians face today in social media. Librarians help their users to avoid information disorders by evaluating the authors and publishers and help identify and understand different perspectives and views and awareness of biased content. Asserting professional identity at a height of a pandemic is challenging.

This pilot study seeks to explore the relationship between professional identities and the participation of librarians in an infodiverse environment and how they counter an infodemic of what is perceived to be harmful sources of information. Specific research questions include: 1. What aspects of professional identity are present in Filipino librarians? 2. Do these reflect their knowledge practices when applied to the evaluation of social media health information during the pandemic? 3. How do they respond to an infodiverse environment during a pandemic?

METHODS

Participants were selected from a list of attendees during the national conference of the Association of Special

Libraries of the Philippines held on October 2022. The conference was attended by about 40 in-person participants. Using purposive sampling, participants during the conference were voluntarily asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. An interview guide was prepared to solicit answers describing the participants' professional identity and knowledge practices related to social media health information particularly during the pandemic. The interview guide contains 14 questions including items which reveal the type of special library where they work; see [Appendix](#). Some questions were inspired by a study by Walker (2021) on a medical library's role in countering infodemics. The interview guide starts with the librarian's profile, interaction with their patron during COVID-19, and library strategies considered during the pandemic. In a virtual meeting with an external evaluator, the questions were asked for validation and testing. The questions were formulated to assess their knowledge practices during the pandemic.

Respondents were anonymized and results were presented in a thematic way. Using Pierson et al. (2019) categories of librarian's professional identity, data captured from the interview were analysed; these categories operationally define professional identities of librarians as applied during the pandemic. Only four of the 14 characteristics were highlighted in this study. It seems possible that other characteristics will emerge as a result of the study, however the study addresses and presents education and training, primary identity, self-claiming and professional status as possible common characteristics. Further research will observe and takes into account the remaining eight characteristics.

RESULTS

Four librarians agreed to be interviewed in-person. Although this represents a small sample, it is sufficient for a preliminary investigation. A follow-up virtual interview was also made to examine their previous answers. Every in-person and virtual interview took less than an hour (i.e., less than 30 min for in-person and less than 40 min for virtual interview).

Two of the respondents are medical/health librarians (M1 and M2) while the other two represent nonmedical related disciplines (NM1 and NM2). Among the four librarians, only one finished MLIS while the other two are underway to finish their MLIS degrees. One of them did not take a master's degree. All four librarians regardless of having a master's degree or not are now in professional practice. In the Philippines, an undergraduate LIS degree is offered by the higher education institutions. All four respondents are active in the profession as evidenced

TABLE 1 Librarians' prior knowledge of COVID-19.

Prior knowledge	Possible effect
Easily transmissible (NM2)	Can lead to sudden death if treatment is delayed
Ordinary disease (M1)	An ordinary health condition
No prior knowledge (NM1, M2)	The lack of knowledge lead to anxiety

by their participation as an executive board officer of LIS organisations. Aside from the special library associations, all of them are members of an accredited national library association, in this case, the Philippine Librarians Association, Inc.

Respondents were asked about their health information knowledge during COVID-19 as a starting point to understand their roles during an infodemic. Summarising their responses, their COVID-19 knowledge showed that they are not fully knowledgeable and have a low understanding of what pandemic means (Table 1). For instance, one of the respondents (NM2) mentioned that COVID-19 is easily transmissible and can lead to sudden death if treatment is delayed while M1 thinks it is an ordinary disease. NM1 and M2 had no prior knowledge. To keep them informed, respondents claim to find online news articles about the pandemic. Two respondents (M1 and M2) accessed academic sources as their effort to better understand the COVID-19. Respondent M2 applied the training of a medical librarian by checking PubMed. NM2 watched news and read links from social media to keep abreast with the pandemic. One of them, NM1, was curious as to how this health concern can end, and their levels of anxiety starting to rise. These questions constitute their conception and efforts about their views on the pandemic and COVID-19 as a new threat to the health of the people.

The respondents were asked if there is a new mission for librarians when social media was introduced. Librarians believed that tasks of librarians such as awareness of factual information and validating its credibility in social media need to be highlighted (M1, NM1, M2). Checking the legitimacy of the source is an important role of librarians that identifies their mission to combat false information. Librarians must share resources, teach how to do fact-checking, and never share content if they have not evaluated the sources (NM2, M2).

The role of librarians has also shifted and dramatically changed (Table 2). Respondents were asked about the role of librarians in today's infodiverse and infodemic context. What should the librarians do in these situations? Librarians now have greater responsibility and should be seen as professional role models (NM2, M2).

TABLE 2 Roles of librarians in times of infodemic.

Roles of librarians	Description
Maintain professionalism (NM2, M2)	Should be seen as professional role models by applying skills in validating reliable and accurate information
Counter false information (M2)	An emerging role of librarians to minimise the spread of false news and information
Question authority (M2)	Trust in authority is a challenge. The librarian must verify the source regardless of who shared an information
Educate oneself (M1, M2, NM1, NM2)	Social media is a complex platform that needs more understanding on how information is being shared. Educate oneself first before educating others
Educate others (M1, M2)	Having gained enough skills in identifying false information, the librarian is now ready to teach others how to access, evaluate, and scrutinise social media information

Librarians are skilled in finding legitimate sources, thus there is a need to validate information coming from various channels and by disseminating only reliable and correct information (M1, NM1, NM2). Countering false information is now the role of librarians to avoid being victims of false information (M2).

Data indicate that respondents believe that being a librarian has given them the basic knowledge to identify what constitutes misinformation and provide accurate information to their users (M1, NM1, NM2, M2). They also acknowledge that since social media is a dynamic platform, they need more understanding and training to identify the challenges of social media (M1, NM1, NM2, M2). At some point, even professionals can be victims of misinformation or disinformation when they placed trust in a certain authority claiming a source is true but turned out to be false (M2), which can affect the lives of their social media friends when it is shared without verifying the source.

During the pandemic, library services were operating online. Virtual services are offered to replace in-person transactions. Librarians receive requests from their users containing questions about COVID-19 or assistance to answer in-depth queries about the pandemic. M1 and M2 accommodated pandemic-related questions from users and directed them to use academic and scientific databases subscribed to by the libraries. According to M1, it is

the librarian's duty to teach users how to use their databases properly. Meanwhile, M2 believes that as knowledgeable person who is trained in scientific sources of information, they are the best people to be approached when someone asks for help in dealing with search strategies. The librarians working in non-medical related disciplines, NM1 and NM2, did not encounter any patrons asking for help in COVID-19-related research.

In relation to librarian-patron interaction where a patron asks for reliable or trustworthy COVID-19 information, only NM1 received an inquiry pertaining to the credibility of a news article. In this case, the librarian explained that they teach patrons to avoid accessing wikis that are questionable and verify information from suggested sources found at the reference list. Since wikis are editable formats, they suggest using academic databases in searching for health information. Two librarians have similar answers, NM1 and M2, claiming that the library is a source of accurate information thus patrons learned how to access from legitimate sources. In addition, librarians believed that professionals in the scientific community are the authority and are seen as reputable individuals. However, medical practitioners have difficulty navigating to electronic databases thus they find time to ask the librarians on how to access them. Authorities, no matter what their status is, should also be critically evaluated for what they say.

As part of their professional strategies, librarians advocate for health literacy by having their own education campaign or information dissemination drive through locally available platforms. These initiatives sought to lessen infodemic (misinformation and disinformation). For instance, NM2 made personal initiatives such as compiling health resolutions and documents published by the national COVID-19 response team. In the workplace of NM1, the librarian's belief and practice to control the spread of infodemic happened when she provided research studies that mentioned COVID-19. Unfortunately, power struggles occur between the librarian and officials of an organisation when the librarian uses their strength to provide factual information. As explained by NM1, people of high-ranking position sometimes look down on what a librarian can provide instead of trusting in their capability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Results showed aspects of professional identity present in Filipino special librarians (Table 3). As LIS professionals, their professional identity manifests in the ways in which they sought to understand the pandemic; consulting medical information available via their subscription databases is a characteristic that can solidify their identity as librarians. The organisation where they belong could have influenced

TABLE 3 Aspects of Filipino professional identity and knowledge practices.

Professional identity ^a	Knowledge practices	Description
Education and training (M1, M2, NM1, NM2)	Direct users to academic and scientific databases	Teaching and informing users about the status and effects of a pandemic
Primary identity (NM1, NM2)	Accessed academic sources to understand the pandemic, and understands what they can do in any information-challenged scenario	Forming oneself as a professional librarian means they know how to use the sources they have within and outside the profession
Self-claiming (NM2, M2)	Took initiative to find out the pandemic was a global medical threat	It is the librarian's professional obligation to do their own research
Professional status (M1, M2, NM1, NM2)	Evaluating infodemic and false news	A professional librarian is a role model to everyone. They practice what they preach.

^aProfessional identity characteristics based on Pierson et al.'s (2019) An Integrated Understanding of Librarian Professional Identity.

this behaviour to fully activate their professional identity. For instance, when a medical practitioner asks for real-time COVID-19 information at the start of the pandemic, they realised the role of the librarians. Respondent M2 used PubMed to locate health information at the onset of the pandemic. In this context, the identity of librarian is emphasised as one of professional status (Pierson et al., 2019). However, NM1 and NM2 never received COVID-19-related questions but were aware of the pandemic and were ready to answer possible health-related questions. Their professional status was still manifest as it is their primary identity.

Filipino librarians pass through a licensure examination provided by the state before becoming a librarian thus easily identified as professionals. Their years of studies and practice make them intentional librarians (Pierson et al., 2019). After gaining professional education and attending training to keep up with trends and issues, they are ready to face information challenges. As early as 2017, research on misinformation and its impact on libraries, social media and civic engagement was already in

place (Batchelor, 2017). Batchelor suggests that activities in libraries that entice the community to be socially aware about false information help consumers to be fully informed, individuals. In a scoping review conducted by Yap et al. (2023), a library's role is revealed as expanding to providing a space for conversations and opening virtual platforms to combat false narratives. The abundant appearance of inaccurate information creates complex issues. Libraries are the best spaces where diversity can be respected. Libraries advocate for multiculturalism. The challenge is how to ensure that libraries avoid bias in their collection, programmes, or services that would cater to all.

Within a pandemic setting, the rise of infodemic gave them an opportunity to advance their knowledge by going back to basics and reading what COVID-19 is all about and how to deal with it. Despite infodiversity of materials, and even groups of individuals questioning their authority, librarians continue to learn and teach users about what's happening around them through the use of available academic and scientific databases.

In the example of NM1 and NM2, they may not be medical librarians, but they know when their service is needed. They may not be trained medical librarians, but their role as a librarian manifest to identify what information is needed in a pandemic situation. This in turn leads to having their personal belief that once a librarian, one should know their responsibilities. Self-claiming is the librarian's professional obligation to understand what the pandemic is all about and curate pandemic-related information that is useful to the information needs of the general community. This was confirmed by NM2 and M2 when they said that librarians should be seen as professional role models.

Professional status legitimises and defines the librarian identity. As a community of librarians, they advocate for credible, reliable, factual information no matter how infodiverse the information is out there. Through years of experience, librarians do not support bias and false information. Since librarians are skilled in finding legitimate sources, they know how to evaluate infodemic and counter information disorders. This is confirmed by all librarians who were interviewed.

CONCLUSION

Librarians are in the position to address an infodemic. Their years of practice in evaluating news, information, and content acknowledge the professional responsibilities that shape their identities. Their approach to combatting misinformation and disinformation circulating in social media is a knowledge practice that can be applied to all forms of media. Librarians remind us that their profession remains undervalued as people in organisations

must discover what librarians can potentially do, at least in the Philippine context. Within a pandemic setting, librarians' roles did not change but expanded to include all varieties of information that need to be evaluated.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

A. Profile of participants

1. What is your educational background and highest educational attainment?
 - 1.1 Are you working now as a medical/health librarian?
 - 1.2 How active are you in your profession?
 - 1.3 Can you describe your journey as a librarian and your experiences in librarianship?

B. COVID-19 background information

1. What information do you know about COVID-19 (in 2020)?
 - 1.1 What efforts did you make to understand about COVID-19 and its effects?
 - 1.2 Have you attended trainings, seminars or workshops related to: fake news, false information, or COVID-19 misinformation?

- 1.3 What do you think is the new mission of librarians today with the presence of social media?
- 1.4 What do you think is the role of librarians knowing that fake news is out there?
- 1.5 Do you think you have enough skills to identify what constitutes fake news?

C. Librarian-patron interaction during pandemic

1. Did any of your patrons approach you or the library on how to prevent themselves from getting COVID-19?
2. How did the patron approach you when they asked about COVID-19? In-person, by email, chat, or by sending a text message?
3. What COVID-19 questions were asked?
4. Did any of your patrons approach you or the library in helping them with search strategies about COVID-19? What did you do about it? Why did you do it?
5. Did any of your patrons ask for your help to create search alerts about COVID-19? What did you do about it? Why did you do it?
6. Did any of your patrons ask if certain news, article, or video about COVID-19 is reliable and trustworthy? What did you do about it? Why did you do it?
7. What kind of assistance did you or your library make to support the health information needs of your patrons during the pandemic? What did you do about it? Why did you do it?

D. Strategies

1. Did you or your library create a guide to let them know what COVID-19 is all about and how to protect them from the pandemic?
2. Did you or your library curate links, news, or videos about the pandemic and posted them on your library website or printed them in a place where library users can read them to educate them about the risks of COVID-19?
3. Did you or your library conduct information dissemination or education campaign about the misinformation (disinformation, fake news) about COVID-19? How did you do that?
4. What sources of health information did you use in this health literacy campaign on COVID-19?
5. Do you think you have patrons who believe in suob or tuob (steam inhalation)? What did you tell them about this?