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Fake News vs. the Library: Information Literacy, Social Media, and the Role of Libraries

The media is lying to you. *Social* media, that is. As this new form of communication takes over our entire knowledge environment, the old ways of navigating information literacy are changing faster than our capacity to keep up. While humans have always manipulated the channels of communication available to them, social media has warped the truth on a scale like nothing before with its algorithms and echo chambers, fake news and misinformation, and complete lack of editorial standards. Librarians have always been on the front lines of the battle for information literacy, but the misinformation that runs rampant across social media presents a new challenge. Are librarians the heroes we need to preserve the sanctity of truth? Or are we dumping an impossible problem at their feet and abandoning them to fight alone? Information literacy stands as a core value of librarianship – but confronting misinformation is more than just a responsibility of librarians in the modern age. It is an opportunity to stay relevant in a world rapidly forgetting the value of literacy and truth.

Before discussing how information literacy functions as a core value of librarianship, first we must ask: what *is* information literacy? The term was coined by Paul Zurkowski in 1974, “spurred by a sense of an emergent crisis of information illiterate workers facing a new information-based society and economy” (Seale and Nicholson, 2024, p. 3). Beyond traditional literacy, the specifics of “information literacy” – a term which may be uncomfortably vague at first – is best understood as

improving how individuals interact with the technologies that convey information, an increasingly unavoidable part of modern life. “It involves the safe and critical use of technologies at work, leisure, and communication, or the use of the computer to obtain, evaluate, store, produce, present, and exchange information, or to communicate and participate in cooperation networks via the Internet” (Sanches, 2022, p. 2). Because modern communication involves not just media and news but also social media posts, website pages, data visualizations, online forms, and so much more, there is a need for education on how to understand all of this “information.” And librarians are tasked with providing this education, because after all: “Librarians are information educators, and we can work to make our community members better educated, as well as more thoughtful future information creators, users, and sharers” (Agosto, 2018, p. 9). Put simply, information literacy is the process of becoming more knowledgeable as information “creators, users, and sharers.”

However, the American Library Association does not list “information literacy” as one of its explicit core values, instead opting for terms like “Access,” “Public Good,” and “Intellectual Freedom” (American Library Association [ALA], 2024). Does this mean that “information literacy” is not a core value? I would argue that the importance of information and how we educate our patrons on its fundamental concepts is baked into the very idea of the library. As the ALA states in its “Code of Ethics” (2021), “We significantly influence or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information.” They also explicitly tie the information presented through social media to the concepts of *all* information that libraries are built to provide: “As an institution, a library possesses the same ethical obligation regarding patron education and social media as it does toward information presented in any format” (ALA, 2019). In many ways these core values stand together, inherently influencing one another – and when one pillar of the library’s “ethical obligation” towards information is threatened, they are all weakened. “[T]he fake news issue touches on the core values that animate public libraries: intellectual freedom, equitable access to

library and information services, literacy, and lifelong learning” (Himmelfarb, 2018, p. 107).

Information literacy is an essential component of providing access to the public good of education, and thus it must be included on a list of the library’s core values.

If information literacy is a core value, then libraries take on the *responsibility* of providing education on this topic to their patrons. “[L]ibrarians have been fighting disinformation for decades by helping the public stay informed, educating the public about information and media literacy and curating information sources” (KaabOmeir et al., 2024, p. 431). Whether educational resources like K-12 schools or universities are falling short, or simply because new technologies mean older patrons must continually be re-educated, libraries have stepped up to fill the void that other means of instruction have left behind. Libraries are better positioned than media companies to do so: “In a fragmented media landscape that has fewer small, trusted outlets (local newspapers continue to disappear at a rate of two per week), more billionaire media owners prioritizing profit over public interest, and an administration that has called the media ‘the enemy of the people,’ libraries play an important role in supporting efforts to promote truth and build a stronger information ecosystem” (Rich, 2025, p. 5). Because of this trusted role in society, libraries go beyond having a responsibility to advance information literacy; this also represents an *opportunity*. 94% of teenagers believe that media literacy should be a required subject taught in school (Maughan, 2025, p. 46). This means that there is a population hungry to learn more about the media and knowledge systems that they interact with every day. At a time when some question the ongoing relevance of libraries in a post-internet world, taking on the task of improving information literacy is a way to provide what the people want and need.

Information literacy would not be such a prevalent topic for libraries to tackle if it weren’t for the unique challenges of misinformation and social media. While misinformation can take many forms, it is often summarized as “fake news.” “The first definition of the term fake news was

provided by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead read[ers]” (KaabOmeir et al., 2024, p. 439). As social media became the primary source of many people’s news, information presented as fact but that is demonstrably false began to spread rapidly through political and social discourse. Fake news is “content [that] might be made up, used to give an incorrect impression, delivered by a source that is not what it claims to be, or intended as satire or parody...” (Carrillo, 2022, p. 103). Misinformation may not always be intentional, but it is still a threat to the function of an informed society. “Information-thirsty consumers are left not knowing what, if any, of the information they draw from the well is safe to consume. They come to distrust all information, and the basic trust needed for civil discourse and a democratic society is wiped out” (Shumaker, 2022, p. 20). This is why information literacy has become a core value of librarianship, as we seek to help consumers learn how to distinguish what they are drawing from the well of common knowledge.

Social media itself presents a unique amplifier for misinformation content. Because of its widespread usage, social media has come to dominate the conversation. 5.16 billion users “spend at least six hours per day online (Global Digital Insights, 2023)” (Weiss, 2024, p. 107). And among 18-29-year-olds, 84% use social media platforms daily (Santamaria and Pfannenstiel, 2024, p. 3). When this vast majority of people use social media, they may not even realize that it fundamentally differs from the traditional news media. “[R]eal news outlets try to meet at least some of the standards of journalism as put forward in journalism schools and professional organizations such as the American Press Institute, and they are expected to make corrections and apologize when they fall short” (Mathiesen, 2018, pp. 78-79). These editorial standards may be invisible to most readers, but they are sorely missed on social media where any user can post anything, regardless of their own credentials or any semblance of truth in the content itself. We are left to deduce the trustworthiness of social media content for ourselves, but this introduces the final hurdle: the sheer

scope and scale of social media is overwhelming. Unlike a newspaper with editors who must only verify a set number of stories, social media feeds are a constant flow of millions of pieces of content every minute. And unlike a human editor who can be trained (or blamed), the unknowable algorithm driving those feeds cannot be verified by an outside source. “Algorithms, especially those using machine learning and deep learning, are complex, opaque, invisible, shielded by intellectual property protection, and most importantly, consequential in the everyday lives of people” (Ridley and Pawlick-Potts, 2021, p. 4). Whether due to the widespread usage, the absence of professional standards, the sheer scale of the content, or the mysterious whims of the algorithm, social media is a new challenge in information literacy unlike any before. Are librarians up to the task?

Libraries are quick to jump into the role of educating society on information literacy because of the skills and reputation they have built across decades of work in the public sphere. “The very nature of library and information science education and of library work means that librarians know much more about how information is created, distributed, and used than most members of the public, and they are perfectly positioned to teach their users what they know and how to apply that knowledge to everyday life contexts” (Agosto, 2018, p. 7). But it is not only the library’s position that makes them well-suited to addressing the misinformation crisis; their understanding of technology – as advocates, purveyors, and critics – allows them to place the overall crisis within a context of access. “Libraries have traditionally played a central role in making emerging technologies accessible to their communities... Advancing digital access, digital literacy, and digital inclusion have long been acknowledged by governments and public agencies as a role of the public library even if not appropriately funded to do so” (Ridley and Pawlick-Potts, 2021, p. 5). We will return to the last point on funding later, but it’s clear that institutions such as governments and universities view libraries as fundamental to this fight and perfectly suited to the challenge.

The broader public also sees libraries as the educational resource they trust. “According to the Pew Research Centre, a large majority (78%) of U.S. people believe libraries are an excellent resource for locating credible information. Therefore, some scholars and professionals in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) have urged libraries to build on that trust in order to provide the public with high-quality information and education or to aid in reestablishing trust in traditional journalism and other reliable sources” (KaabOmeir et al., 2024, p. 431). That trust is vital in a low-truth environment where the motives of the large tech companies and political actors driving media cycles are questionable at best. Libraries may be able to leverage that goodwill to encourage people to engage with the issue and take some responsibility for their information diet.

But even if libraries are willing to be responsible for information literacy in our society, not everyone believes that they are *able* to do so – or that it is fair to ask them to bear this burden. Numerous challenges face the modern library worker in providing information literacy instruction: “In the public library realm, qualitative research has shown that staff members generally understand the psychological and social complexities of misinformation, but they face a number of challenges in working with patrons, including a lack of time and resources, as well as a lack of confidence in their expertise and a reluctance to engage with controversial political topics (Young, et al., 2021)” (Willenborg and Detmering, 2025, p. 5). As stated above, they are consistently underfunded for the time and effort which must go into workshops and online tools; if a library is already understaffed, they will hardly have the manpower to guide individual patrons through learning about information literacy. And when they do have the opportunity to provide a workshop, their tools are often outdated and lacking. The popular CRAAP checklist for information (currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose) has many critics. “[P]articipants consistently derided the CRAAP Test as an outdated method of information evaluation not suited for the current information environment” (Willenborg and Detmering, 2025, p. 7). Others have also pointed out that

checklists such as these will produce their own issues in the results, including bias and privilege. Jaeger-McEnroe (2025) points out that using a lack of academic or organizational credentials to weed out authors may impact less privileged populations that historically have had less access to those credentials (p. 1). Not to mention that any checklist which must be applied to every single post in an endless stream of social media quickly becomes overwhelming.

This sense of overwhelm at the task of combating misinformation is not only for the patrons learning new skills – but also for the librarians teaching them. Some voices in the industry are beginning to speak out about the toll this is taking on library workers. “They are overwhelmed by this huge misinformation problem and experience anxiety and distress around their role in combating the issue, while also not feeling quite like experts on misinformation but still feeling obligated to address it. Librarians also have to deal with the fact that misinformation conversations are inherently political, and there’s always the possibility of pushback from students” (Pfeiffer et al., 2025). Asking librarians to wade into difficult and divisive political conversations, on top of their mission to tackle fact checking the entire internet, leads to a series of emotional and mental impacts on their personal wellbeing. “Our investment in IL [information literacy] has led to burnout, feelings of being overwhelmed, professional anxiety, overthinking, and lack of confidence” (Seale and Nicholson, 2024, p. 4). Librarians often enter this profession due to the very moral compass that leads them to take responsibility for this misinformation crisis, but it leaves them vulnerable to burnout and anxiety when the task is greater than they can handle. Perhaps it is unfair to ask them to get involved in this issue at all.

However, as I argued above, there is a strong sense of responsibility in the library world to play our part in demonstrating the core value of information literacy – and I believe that the downsides to doing so as listed in the previous paragraph are due to structural and organizational limitations placed on librarians, not a mismatch between mission and industry. Therefore, we need

to think of new ways to provide information literacy instruction that gives librarians a chance to honor this core value while also preserving their own wellbeing. First, of course, we must sufficiently fund libraries and give them the resources and time they need to do this work. Second, we must take the existing guidelines for information literacy instruction and do what we can to improve them. Mathiesen (2018) provides some familiar ideas, such as creating tools to help individuals spot fake news and creating aids to determine source accuracy (pp. 88-89). Also, Willenborg and Detmering (2025) consider ideas such as flipping instruction with pre-loaded material given to students before instruction to “get more value from the one-shot,” and encouraging universities to offer “credit-bearing courses” so librarians have more time with their students (p. 12). Finally, another popular idea that came up repeatedly was collaborating with other disciplines. “Collaboration with disciplines like psychology, sociology, and journalism that approach misinformation from a different angle than librarians could help us develop a more complex view of misinformation” (Pfeiffer et al., 2025). Despite their vocational calling, librarians are not the only professionals doing work in the information ecosystem, and they not only shouldn’t bear the responsibility alone – they also benefit from the expertise of others. Bringing in the perspective of journalists or content creators to round out a patron’s perspective on misinformation and social media could be incredibly helpful. And media creators could also engage users’ attention for this work, such as a popular resource on “Beyonce’s Lemonade and Information Resources” that one library shared and “which was viewed 14,000 times in the first 24 hours alone” (Hernandez, 2018, p. 169). Meeting people where they are on social media and in pop culture could be the library’s ticket to relevance and impact on this issue. It also demonstrates the *opportunity* this presents to make libraries part of the national conversation.

Solving the misinformation crisis on social media is going to take every resource at our disposal, and despite the many difficulties involved, libraries should not back away from the

responsibility and the opportunity this represents. Standing by one of the core values of this field, to provide information literacy education to patrons of all ages, means thinking creatively, sharing resources, and collaborating with other disciplines. Though the scale and complexity of social media amplifies the dangers of misinformation almost beyond our capacity, the risks of allowing fake news to proliferate unchecked outweigh the trials librarians face in providing those checks and balances. With our unique skillsets, our mastery of technology and information evaluation, and the trust the public has in us due to our conscientiousness and expertise, librarians are the champions we need to fight the misinformation crisis. When social media lies to you, librarians will teach you how to find the truth. Supporting them and joining that fight is a value in which we can all believe.

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