FAKE NEWS VS. THE LIBRARY

Information Literacy, Social Media, and the Role of Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Libraries have always been at the forefront of how our society navigates the world of information – and now that world is online. Social media websites are news channels, content creators are journalists and educators, and the algorithm is our librarian. But with this brave new world has come a wave of misinformation threatening our fragile democracy. Should libraries, with their core value of information literacy, get involved in the fight? Even with their established roles as the stewards of information, is there anything that librarians can do to save us from ourselves?

CORE VALUE = INFORMATION LITERACY

"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." (American Library Association, 2019)

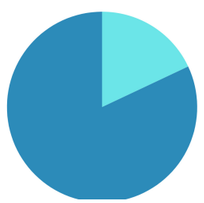
"[T]he fake news issue touches on the core values that animate public libraries: intellectual freedom, equitable access to library and information services, literacy, and lifelong learning." (Himmelfarb, 2018, p. 107)

"We teach our community members about information. That is our special contribution to bettering society. Remember: 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)

MISINFORMATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

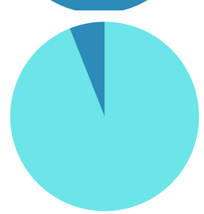
Figure 1. Word Cloud of Keywords used in the Assessment of the Literature on Misinformation (KaabOmeir et al, 2024, p. 440)

"[T]hree contemporary threats to democracy: the influence that emotions and personal beliefs have over objective facts in shaping public opinion, a phenomenon that has led many to argue that we are living in a post-truth culture; the divisiveness in the United States, exacerbated by the digitally enabled echo chambers and filter bubbles through which we receive information; and the increased amount of information available to us, which has made assessing the trustworthiness of information more difficult." (Carillo, 2022, p. 2)



18%

"only 18% of surveyed teens were able to correctly distinguish between such information types as news, opinion, and advertisement" (Maughan, 2025, p. 45)



94%

"94% of teens surveyed believe that media literacy should be a required subject taught in schools" (Maughan, 2025, p. 46)

LIBRARIES SHOULD GET INVOLVED

"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)

"[T]he influence of fake news is far-reaching, and librarians must make combating its effects a core goal of their work not just during elections but at all times." (Agosto, 2018, p. 6)

LIBRARIES SHOULD NOT GET INVOLVED

"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)

"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)

IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

Ideas for combatting fake news (Mathiesen, 2018, pp. 88-89)

- Create norms around thoughtful sharing and 'liking' information
- Don't rely on fact-checking websites alone
- Support the creation of tools that enable individuals to easily spot or block fake news
- Create aids for determining the accuracy and source of information

"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)

"The popularity of this particular guide [Beyonce's Lemonade and Information Resources], which was viewed 14,000 times in the first 24 hours alone, speaks to the potential success of conveying the importance of information literacy through topical issues such as popular art and music and, perhaps most effectively, fake news." (Hernandez, 2018, p. 169)

CONCLUSION

As the information environment evolves around us, libraries and the librarians who serve them must evolve with it. Providing information literacy education is an opportunity for librarians to stay relevant – but we must also be careful not to exhaust our resources chasing the impossible. Collaborating with others and getting creative in how we educate may hold the answer. But one thing is clear: the fight against fake news is far from over.

Citations available on separate handout