Marketing Libraries in an Era of "Fake News"

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In keeping with this month's theme of trustworthy information, the editors of this column have written about the ways that libraries have capitalized on the currency of this topic to market themselves and their information literacy programs.—*Editors*

As evidenced by the theme of this issue, "fake news" is the topic du jour. And while it's not a good news story for the world in general, it's presenting a great opportunity for libraries to show their worth. The heightened awareness of the need for information literacy—media literacy, digital literacy, and all the other literacies associated with it—is a wonderful opportunity for libraries to show that they are as relevant and important today as they ever were, perhaps even more so.

This has been a particularly opportune time for academic libraries, who have been peddling the importance of information literacy for years, with varying levels of success. Those of us working in academic libraries already know that students aren't masters of discerning good information from bad, especially as information becomes more and more ubiquitous and instantaneous. But with the general public's inability to distinguish between true and false facts under scrutiny of late, our message that we need to educate our students in information literacy is being met with more reception. This comes not just on the heels of the 2016 US election, but it has been increasing in the last few years with the growing popularity of social media and alternative forms of news gathering. The more places one can get information, the more chances there are that you can get that information from an untrustworthy source, and the more overwhelming it becomes to sort through it all.

Librarians are trained to question even the most reputable of sources. A memorable assignment from library school asked me to fact check an obituary. I chose a random obituary from several decades ago and fact checked it using genealogical databases, *Who's Who in America*, and other news articles of the time. I was excited to realize that the *New York Times* actually reported the deceased's age incorrectly. He was a few months away from turning the age listed in the headline when he died. I had found a mistake in the *Times*! This was my first important lesson that even publications that strive to report accurate and unbiased information sometimes get it wrong. For further proof, just check out the *New York Times Corrections*, which lists recently corrected articles regularly.[1]

Several academic institutions have capitalized on the fake-news trend, using the sudden spotlight to their advantage.

Figure 1. Infographic from Harvard's "Fake News, Misinformation, and Propaganda Guide," http://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake.

Harvard Library has created a research guide on "Fake News, Misinformation, and Propaganda" (http://guides.library.harvard.edu/fake) that links to academic articles on the topic,

Figure 2. IFLA's "How to Spot Fake News" infographic, https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174.

lists fact-checking resources, and features an eye-catching infographic (see figure 1). The University of Toronto Libraries also features a page on their website, "How Do I Spot Fake News?" (https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/faq/how-do-i-spot-fake-news) that contains tips to recognize incredible news sources and ways to verify them, as well as links to other articles on the topic. It also features a very useful infographic developed by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which provides both JPG and PDF versions of the graphic in dozens of languages (see figure 2). The examples are endless; libraries all over are using the currency of the topic to speak to their communities (see figure 3). Even vendors are getting in on the trend. In January 2017, ProQuest wrote a blog post titled "The Library's Role in a 'Post-truth,' 'Fake News' Era" (http://www.proquest.com/blog/pqblog/2017/The-librarys-role-in-a-post-truth-fake-news-era.html) featuring the results of a survey they conducted in 2016, the results of which were published in a white paper, "Toward an Information Literate Society" (http://media2.proquest.com/documents/surveyresults-informationliteracy-2016.pdf).[2]

In fact, some institutions are even offering credit-bearing classes on the subject. The University of Michigan Library debuted a one-credit course, Fake News, Lies, and Propaganda: How to Sort Fact from Fiction in fall 2017.[3]
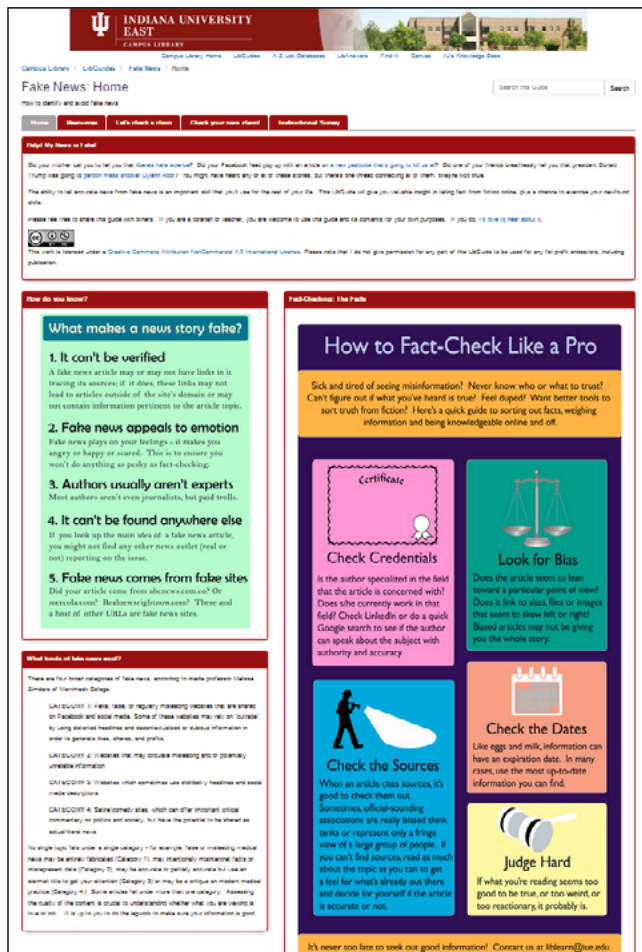
Figure 3. Indiana University East's "Fake News LibGuide," http://iue.libguides.com/fakenews.

One of the first courses of this kind that came to my attention was a collaboration between a biologist and a librarian at the University of Washington called Calling Bullshit: Data Reasoning in a Digital World, which was open for registration in spring 2017; they expanded it from a one-credit course to a three-credit course for the 2017–18 academic year.[4] The first set of ten lectures are available on their website, http://callingbullshit.org/videos.html. Of course, many academic librarians are broaching the topic in the classes they teach or guest lecture in. Overall, the "post-truth" era has provided a great conversation opener for academic librarians, as a way in which to convince their faculty that their classes really will benefit from a lesson (or several) in information literacy. It has raised our profile and our apparent relevancy to new heights, and we would be foolish not to capitalize on that opportunity to open the door and show our faculty and students what else we are able to provide for them. Marketing our services is often difficult in the crowd of messages around campus, so any chance we have to stand out from the crowd with a topical message that has currency at the moment is a good thing. The post-truth era has provided academic librarians with
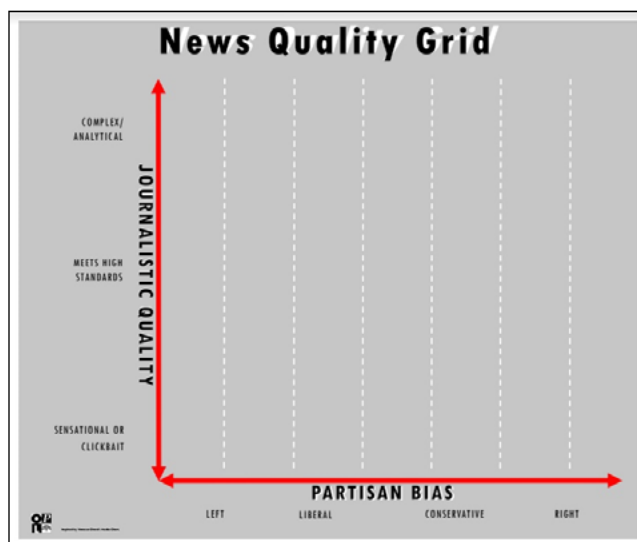

Figure 4. Oakland Public Library's Grid Exercise Passive program poster, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B16-OThiCpn5TWtJVTY3THNmZW8.

Figure 5. An image from the Libraries Transform campaign, http://www.ilovelibraries.org/librariestransform/.

a great PR opportunity.

Public libraries are also responding to this need to discern real news from fake. Oakland Public Library hosts interactive workshops and even takes their show on the road, visiting local classrooms and organizations. They offer a free facilitator's guide to download, which is appropriate for grades 6 and up (see figure 4).[5] Many public libraries have added resource guides to their website listing fact-checking websites, including the Arlington Heights Memorial Library,

which also encourages visitors to contact a specialty librarian for help.[6] The American Library Association is capitalizing on the librarian as information shepherd brand by using it in their Libraries Transform marketing campaign (see figure 5). If something positive is to be gleaned from this era of fake news, it is that this is an opportunity for librarians to remind the public that we are the original fact checkers, always suspicious of news sources and ready to help the public sift through media.

Some public libraries are actually collaborating with journalists in teaching young people how to spot "alternative facts." The Dallas Public Library, one of the winners of the 2016 Knight News Challenge, hosted an eight-week course for high-school students that included database instruction from DPL librarians as well as mentoring from journalists at the Dallas Morning News.[7] Information literacy is now considered a core skill in many schools where it used to be considered nice to know but not a necessity. The propagation of fake news and alternative facts during the 2016 election was abetted by social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Librarians and journalists have taken this as a call to arms to help members of the public hone their ability to wade through what is real and what is fabricated.

Society as a whole needs to grapple with the issue of fake news, credibility, and information overload. There are real consequences to misinformation; diseases can spread, wars can begin, and lives can be at stake. Of course libraries have taken up the call: always responding to issues of social justice and societal need, libraries are usually among the first to respond to a public issue. We are uniquely positioned at the nexus of our communities and educational systems, and we already have the tools in our arsenal when it comes to making our constituents information literate. The fact that it has become trendy to talk about these issues is a great opportunity for libraries to market themselves as more than just books but current, relevant places of knowledge and education as well.

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