
Collection Development in an Era of “Fake News”

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This Alert Collector column for *RUSQ*'s special issue “Trusted Information in an Age of Uncertainty” is not going to be the usual list of great resources to add to your collection. In fact, despite a broadly distributed call for Alert Collector columns for this special issue, no one took me up. I do not blame them! At the suggestion of the editor of *RUSQ*, I decided to put together a “think” piece on fake news as it relates to collection development. I am not going to propose any radical or innovative approaches to how librarians develop collections for the purpose of battling fake news. I do not feel such an approach is possible. What I do want to do in this column is reaffirm and highlight things that I know many of my colleagues are already doing and have been trying to do since the dawn of collection building in libraries.—*Editor*

It goes without saying that we try to purchase high-quality items that represent all points of view, even those with which we personally disagree. Monographs published by reputable non-academic presses and whose authors' opinions are outside the mainstream are still good additions to our collections. Self-published screeds found with an Amazon search? Perhaps not so much. I see these latter types of books in my own collection-development work. A quick check of the holdings of the consortium to which my institution belongs reveals how many other libraries have added the item: usually zero. Differing points of view are necessary for topics in history, political science, current events, and others, but it becomes debatable when you start adding self-published items that refute scientific or scholarly consensus on topics like global climate change or the efficacy of vaccines. The addition of those items could be viewed as a tacit acceptance of the validity of unscientific claims for the purpose of presenting both sides. Conversely, if you omit such items from your collection, clientele with an ideological axe to grind see that omission as censorship of contrarian views. This may be more of an issue in public libraries, where patrons demand lightly researched and politically charged nonfiction titles by Ann Coulter or Michael Moore.¹ Libraries are often in a no-win situation. Anyway, it does not seem possible that a library can represent all points of view, so perhaps the best approach is to strive for what librarian Rick Anderson calls “a reasonably broad range of views on social and scholarly topics . . . broad enough to facilitate and inform genuine critical thinking on the part of patrons, rather than simply confirming patrons in their pre-existing bias (or those of librarians).”²

What to do? Have a tightly written collection development policy that spells out how you approach deciding what

goes in the collection (including how gift items are handled) and develop a policy of how to handle challenges to materials. Not exactly rocket science. Anderson also suggests a long look at the criteria for how items are selected, including a “probing discussion of the controlling assumptions that underlie our assessment of what is actually worthy of inclusion.”³ That discussion could even include whether or not factually unreliable items should or should not be included in the collection.⁴

Of course, you can build a diverse collection of high-quality resources that represent many points of view, but your students or patrons still have to want to use them! There is a reason that the saying “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink” is one of the oldest English proverbs still in use today.⁵ It’s a time-tested truth. Motivated reasoning is a powerful factor in our students’ or patrons’ refusal to engage with a broad swathe of opinion. Dan Jones, writing in *New Scientist*, said:

In the real world of flesh-and-blood humans, **reasoning** often starts with established conclusions and works back to find “facts” that support what we already believe. And if we’re presented with facts that contradict our beliefs, we find clever ways to dismiss them. We’re more wily defence lawyer than objective scientist.⁶

To address this in higher education, librarians could work with faculty to develop assignments that force students to engage with opinions that differ from their own. For instance, make them write a book review of an item that

contradicts their own view and provide a clear rubric for how their analysis or opinion will be graded. In public libraries—for which I have limited professional experience—I do not know of specific ways motivated reasoning is combated. Book discussion groups and bringing in guest experts or representatives from local news outlets are a great idea. Lectures and workshops on fake news are another idea.⁷

There is no magic bullet for collection-development librarians in the battle against fake news. Our time-honored principles of open-mindedness, inclusion, and neutrality (as much as that is possible), and our resourcefulness at identifying the resources that make for a diverse collection are all we have—and may be all that is required of us.

References

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