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Information Literacy and Libraries in the Age of Fake News

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Denise E. Agosto, Editor



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ELEVEN

Cultivating Students as Educated Citizens: The Role of Academic Libraries

Hailey Mooney, Jo Angela Oehrl, and Shevon Desai

The silver lining to the dark cloud of fake news is that academic librarians have a whole host of examples and connections to draw upon that can wake students up to the very visceral and real impacts of information production and consumption.

In the fall of 2016, “fake news” began to dominate news headlines and fuel public discourse. Libraries have a long history of working to strengthen the information literacy skills of our patrons, and one can easily view the fake news phenomenon as just the most recent iteration. Rather than cynically accept the current state of affairs as inevitable, at the University of Michigan (U-M) Library, we wanted to take advantage of this unique cultural moment to emphasize the importance of information literacy now more than ever. We had the opportunity to create a one-credit course focusing on fake news and in doing so came to recognize that this was the perfect opportunity to engage both students and our broader community in a much larger discussion about critical thinking in the current information environment.

Fake news has been used as a catchall phrase that means different things to different people. The bigger landscape of misinformation and disinformation reveals a nuanced, complicated issue that reveals the importance of critical thinking and evaluation skills. As librarians, we struggled to address

this complicated landscape in a meaningful way, realizing that taking a simple checklist approach (e.g., “five easy things you can do to fight fake news!”) would be doing a disservice to our community. As much as we could, we strived to provide resources (instruction, guides, community events, workshops, and more) that did not dumb down what is a complex problem.

In terms of instruction, what fake news has made painfully evident is that our goals for the classroom must extend beyond merely equipping students to complete the immediate assignment at hand. Every instruction session is an opportunity to impart the lifelong learning goals that are embedded in the Association of College & Research Libraries’ (ACRL) *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. Indeed, it is inspiring to remind ourselves that one of the larger goals of liberal arts–centered higher education is to create citizens who embody moral and social responsibility (Association of American Colleges & Universities 2007). An approach to instruction that considers these big-picture goals is critical pedagogy, which endeavors to integrate social justice aims, such as to support a democratic society wherein informed citizens actively participate in their own governance and are capable of gaining legitimate knowledge about their communities.

In our case, it became clear that the community itself also has a strong desire for a deeper understanding of the fake news problem within the larger information environment and for stronger information literacy skills to deal with the increasingly complicated demands on us as information consumers. The enormous public response to a single press release announcing the library’s development of a course focusing on fake news (Piñon 2017) took us by surprise. Within a few short months, we had done dozens of news interviews with numerous local, national, and international media outlets, participated on a local YV news talk show, were invited to join journalist panel discussions, been asked to participate in many local and national events, and were regularly fielding questions about the course itself.

In considering all the activities and resources related to fake news that we have undertaken, the following chapter addresses in more detail those that are transferrable to other libraries and the most relevant to developing critical thinking skills within the context of the current information landscape of misinformation and disinformation. We discuss the range of engagement that librarians at U-M have had with fake news, from the development of the fake news course itself, with the associated media and community outreach opportunities, to how fake news has impacted our

approach to traditional one-shot instruction sessions. Informing all of our fake news efforts has been a philosophy of encouraging deeper engagement with the issues affecting our information environment.

U-M LIBRARY'S ENGAGEMENT WITH FAKE NEWS

During the development of the fake news course, as well as the creation of research guides and one-shot instruction sessions, and throughout our interactions with the media and community organizations, our emphasis has been on critical thinking as a higher-order thinking skill. At the same time, we recognize that this is not something that can be learned in an hour but is rather the beginning of a discussion—a gateway to developing lifelong skills as a critical consumer of information.

The Class

In the winter 2017 semester, Doreen Bradley, U-M Library's director of learning programs and initiatives, had a casual conversation with an assistant dean at the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA) about offering a minicourse focused on fake news. Doreen brought in Shevon Desai, communication studies librarian, Hailey Mooney, psychology & sociology librarian, and Angie Oehrli, a learning librarian. The team put together a course proposal that was quickly accepted by LSA and spent the summer of 2017 developing course content. The minicourse was to be a one-credit, undergraduate class that met for seven weeks. Angie would be the instructor. While there were several learning outcomes for the class, the larger, critical thinking outcomes included that students would be able to:

- critically evaluate news sources in order to determine content credibility;
- analyze the impact of psychological and social factors on media consumption in order to reflect on their own personal media consumption behaviors and practices; and
- discuss the individual and societal impacts of news literacy in order to understand its importance to public policy and democracy.

The focus of the course materials was to emphasize critical thinking about the news. We were interested in creating exercises that helped students develop and implement a personal strategy to make an informed

opinion about current topics so that they could become better informed citizens. For example, many infographics have been created to help news readers develop a checklist whenever they engage with the news. Instead of proposing one of the many infographics as a recommended framework for identifying fake news, we gathered multiple infographics together and asked students to compare the strategies proposed in them. The students applied the infographic strategies to several news articles and then determined the strengths and weaknesses of each set of strategies.

Other critical thinking activities included exercises examining journalism ethics, interpreting data visualizations, and debating the value of the 24-hour news cycle. In many cases, exercises from the class could be used in the library's engagement with fake news in other venues, such as informal teaching opportunities, media interviews, or community talks. A description of the numerous ways our library has brought components of the for-credit fake news class to engage in outreach and community discussion is provided later in this chapter. In other more traditional cases, like course-integrated instruction sessions, core concepts and the ethos of critical thinking can be integrated.

EXTENDING CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT FAKE NEWS INTO TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Regardless of what it's called, fake news as a social phenomenon has been and will continue to be a part of the information landscape regardless of whether or not it garners the necessary interest in your community to merit press attention, community event invitations, and the opportunity to teach a dedicated course. An important outcome of the development of the fake news class was the opportunity to reflect on the overall impacts of current events and the disordered state of the information environment on our everyday classroom instruction. Fake news offers a cultural touchpoint that can be extended to make scholarly information seeking and evaluation more relatable. This section details how the overall philosophy of our fake news instruction, based on a critical pedagogy of developing higher-order thinking skills and reflective practice, can be extended to traditional classroom instruction based on teaching the scholarly literature review.

Regardless of the specific class and assignment, the crux of most academic library instruction revolves around finding and evaluating sources. To contextualize these essential information literacy concepts and skills within a society with a fake news problem is to engage with critical

pedagogy and to see information literacy as a contested part of an overall education system and information environment that reflects oppressive power structures (Tewell 2015). The ability of some information to be made more visible and spread across social networks, as we have seen with the spread of fake news, demonstrates this problematic structure and the manipulation by powerful actors that occurs in the current state of “information disorder” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017) in which students must function. Even a course-related assignment that limits students to using scholarly journal articles still requires engagement and contextualization within the broader information environment. That is to say, all information literacy opportunities are critical information literacy opportunities, and fake news has impacted the information environment in ways that cannot be ignored.

As an additional foundation to this approach, consider that scholarly research doesn’t happen in a vacuum. In fact, the whole point of scholarship is to provide a feedback loop to improve our everyday world. Ideally, the policies that shape civil society have some basis in evidence. A key issue of fake news is the obfuscation of evidence in favor of information that supports policies serving limited interests for selected gains (as opposed to societal interests for the greater good). To the extent that scholarly research is evidence, it is also subject to being faked or taken out of context in order to serve the purposes of fakery. This has been true for hundreds of years, even before Thomas Carlyle bemoaned that “a witty statesman might prove anything by statistics” (1840, p. 9), to the myriad examples we have of today’s fake news.

Making Critical Connections

With a little creativity and forethought, it is possible to take any component of an instruction session and draw out a relationship to the real world, fake news, and critical thinking. In other words, you can “hide carrots in their brownies” and incorporate critical information literacy into any class (Seale 2016). On the flip side, the silver lining to the dark cloud of fake news is that academic librarians have a whole host of examples and connections to draw upon that can wake students up to the very visceral and real impacts of information production and consumption.

Here is an approach to making critical connections happen:

1. *Call it out.* Question the reasoning behind the assignment requirements or recommended information practice in order to draw out the larger purpose and big-picture lifelong learning goals.

2. *Contextualize.* Situate concepts and skills in the broader information environment, both:
 - a. within scholarly communication and disciplinary practices, and
 - b. outward to current events and societal issues.
3. *Connect.* Bring it back to the assignment at hand in order to promote critical engagement with the required task.

Note that, despite the numbered list, this is not a definitive checklist for bringing critical thinking into the library classroom. Remember, our approach to addressing fake news is to move beyond the checklist. This is a starting point for engaging with any typical literature review assignment in a way that makes explicit connections to the liberal arts learning goal to create informed citizens who can apply classroom learning to the real world.

Examples

Let's look at some examples that show how connections to fake news can be drawn when teaching to the common assignment to write a topic paper supported by gathering a small set of scholarly journal articles, for example, find three peer-reviewed articles about your topic.

Assignment Requirement to Find Multiple Sources

1. Call it out.

Ask students: "Why would reliance on a single source be insufficient to understand a topic?" An assignment based on finding more than one source poses an opportunity to discuss the verification process as a search and evaluation strategy. A verification process of consulting multiple sources is needed in order to understand the full range of knowledge on a particular topic and determine consensus.

2. Contextualize.

In fact, the literature review section of an empirical journal article is an exercise in this very process, detailing the previous research that undergirds and pertains to the study at hand. Here is a chance to connect to current events in academia: the rise of the systematic review. Traditionally a technique in evidence-based medical and health sciences research, systematic reviews are being increasingly called for in the social sciences. The idea is that a systematic and transparent approach to literature reviews (not necessarily a full-fledged systematic review using protocols and published as a stand-alone paper) will reduce bias and cherry-picking of sources that support the author's preferred viewpoint (e.g., Albarracín 2015).

Next, build a bridge back to the real world. What sort of bias and cherry-picking of sources occur there? Does your Facebook news feed present a straightforward view of the world? Is there some recent event in the news or policy making that might showcase overreliance on some sources or viewpoints? For example, a tax plan that significantly reduces the corporate tax rate is likely based on the theory of trickle-down economics. Have you heard any news reports that present a balanced literature review on the veracity of trickle-down economics?

3. Connect.

Finally, bring it back to the assignment. What considerations should students make when choosing sources for their bibliographies? They can make their points stronger by citing multiple sources that show the same thing or even by seeking out systematic reviews and using them as a valuable and high-impact source type. They should seek to carefully choose a well curated and representative sample of articles showcasing the range of research findings on a given topic. Not just the first three somewhat relevant articles that come up in their search results.

Assignment Requirement to Find Peer-Reviewed Articles

1. Call it out.

Another part of helping students complete that common peer-reviewed article assignment is a discussion of peer review itself. Ask the students: “Why are scholarly articles peer reviewed?” How does the process help to ensure the integrity of the information? Different publication processes differentiate types of sources and can serve as shorthand for determining credibility.

2. Contextualize.

Most academic librarians can give an explanation, in their sleep, of the purpose of peer review and how it works. We might end by saying that the system is imperfect and has some associated debates as to how peer review should be accomplished. But here is another opportunity to go a little deeper.

Peer review can be and is sometimes faked. So-called predatory journals are an example. Unsuspecting (or complicit) scholars submit their publications to journals that claim to provide quick turnaround times to publication and open access to articles in exchange for an Article Processing Charge (Cress 2017). Another way to fake peer review is for a seemingly legitimate publication to act as a mouthpiece for corporate and industry interests. Editorial boards and authors can have academic credentials but may be acting in the interests of hidden entities that fund their work. For example, consider the publication of scientific research that is used to

support industrial practices and consumer products that overall scientific consensus finds to be harmful (Zou 2016). Tread carefully; don't sow too much additional skepticism because students need to develop trust in science in a world of postmodern constructed truths (Barclay 2017), but do introduce some shades of gray.

3. Connect.

Despite some discussion of the reliability of peer review, the peer reviewed article is the gold standard for publishing scholarly research, and this is why literature review assignments typically contain requirements for including peer reviewed journal articles. Taking the extra step to verify the authenticity of a publication, including the authority of authors and editors, may sometimes be necessary to confirm trustworthiness.

Assignment Requirement (or Recommendation) to Use a Library Database

1. Call it out.

Students will need to be directed to an appropriate database for locating scholarly articles to complete their assignment. So let's look at tools for locating information. What is the current dominant cultural paradigm for finding information? "Just Google it, stupid." Moving students away from Google and toward library databases is usually part of any information literacy session. How much time do you devote to really explaining why Google is problematic? Why is overreliance on any one tool problematic? Choosing a search tool is an opportunity to exercise critical thinking. There are actually many more options than to "just Google it." Making students aware of these options is one thing; helping them to practice evaluation of search *resources* (in addition to sources) is another.

2. Contextualize.

Here's what we learned from fake news and its attendant issues: The technologies that we use to find out about the world are not neutral, and they do not always surface the "right" answer to the very top. Databases and search engines have producers with motives and objectives. Decisions are made on what to include and exclude. Algorithms are constructed by people who have made value judgments as to what is relevant or not. Databases and search engines have varying levels of transparency or opacity regarding how they work and what sources they include. Search engines are not oracles; they are reflections of our society. In a society where fake news and other forms of information obfuscation are commonplace, it is important to be aware that the tools we use to find information are also susceptible to manipulation. An entire sector of the marketing industry is

devoted to search engine optimization, and propagandists employ their own set of methods to inflate the rankings of conspiracy theorists and other sources of fake news that further their aims.

Most library databases also have proprietary relevancy-ranking algorithms that are not disclosed, but other aspects of their content and functioning are more transparent. Journal coverage lists detail exactly which titles are included. Multiple sort functions are available so that one need not rely exclusively on the algorithmic relevancy rank. This puts more control in the hands of the researcher to dictate the search and display of the results. Importantly, library databases do not make their profits from the business model of surveillance capitalism. Libraries and the researchers they represent are the direct customers, not advertisers representing business and political interests.

3. Connect.

An introduction to the recommended library databases for the class that elucidates these broader points will provide an entry by which to highlight the advanced features of the database and provide students with some evaluative criteria for what to look for when using a variety of different search tools. Instead of telling students to use PsycINFO or whatever database because it's simply what you recommend, explain why and provide reflection points regarding the differences between that database and the familiar Google search engine.

Practical Considerations

Make sure that the big picture and current event examples stay within the parameters of the class and assignment. Subject specialist librarians have the advantage of familiarity with the specific scholarly communication practices of the discipline and disciplinary outlooks. Bringing to light tacit disciplinary practices in knowledge creation and dissemination furthers critical information literacy aims (Simmons 2005), and understanding disciplinary approaches to the construction of knowledge can inform understanding of popular ways of knowing. What is the lens that the subject matter of the course provides, and how can you leverage it to deepen your instruction of information literacy concepts? For example, a sociological or feminist approach to information systems reveals the way that search engine algorithms reflect gender and racial bias. A psychology class might discuss cognitive biases that obscure the rational evaluation of information. Find the intersections, and bring them to light.

Talk with the course instructor, and make sure that your learning goals are aligned. Streamline the number of learning goals you plan to cover in your session in order to allow time for bringing to light big-picture connections and for including higher-order thinking skills. (In any case, limiting learning goals generally makes one-shot sessions more manageable.) If you want to plan on some extra discussion time to make explicit connections to fake news in a class focused on scholarly journal articles, then practice the discussion with the instructor first. When you meet with the instructor to discuss the class lesson plan, bring up the critical connections that you see between the assignment and real-world information seeking. This can be part of the natural lesson planning discussion. Instructors may not have considered a critical information literacy angle before and are often receptive to integrating these ideas into the class.

Other Library Engagement

Outside the classroom and curriculum, many in the general public are also deeply interested in understanding the fake news issue and promoting the value of critical thinking. The media attention that our for-credit fake news class received led to intense community interest, including invitations to engage in multiple fake news activities both within and outside the university community. While some of the activities were curriculum based, others had a more external component. We found that it was important to talk about the complexity of fake news at events outside the university. In reminding people that libraries are key places where the general population can engage in discourse about important topics, team members have been able to “show up” in the public debate about fake news. The theme of critically thinking about the news has consistently emerged.

Informal Teaching Opportunities

We created a research guide on fake news (<http://guides.lib.umich.edu/fakenews>) that has an instructional focus. With sections such as “How Do You Recognize Bias in Yourself and in the Media?” and “Why Is [Fake News] Important?” we wanted to focus more on the questions that can be asked by anyone who is reading news of any kind and not just recommend one strategy or type of Web site. There is a page on the research guide explaining where specific media outlets fall on the political spectrum. This

spectrum is not a binary analysis of media sources but instead describes multiple types of political thought, as well as giving an understanding of how those perspectives were identified. This research guide gives the readers multiple approaches for dealing with fake news and does not espouse a checklist approach to the news, instead presenting a more nuanced approach to understanding issues of source evaluation and credibility.

Other teaching opportunities have included partnering in both a Teach Out and a Teach In about fake news. The Teach Out was coordinated by U-M's Office of Academic Innovation and was a digital education opportunity freely open to members of the public. The Teach In was directed by the History Department and was a three-hour session in which the history of fake news was discussed, and we engaged the audience in critical discussions in both small-group and large-group settings. Questions we asked during the Teach In included, "What is fake news?" and "How can you help stop the spread of fake news?" Again, these questions focused more on the complex issues of fake news rather than on simplifying the fake news problem by proposing one solution. The librarians who codeveloped the course have been asked to do one-shot library workshops, as well as to be guest lecturers for U-M classes, and they have even considered developing a digital learning object to help students engage with the news in general.

Noncurricular Teaching Opportunities

Other educational opportunities have been less curriculum based and can be divided into three categories: campus engagement, library community interest, and community/general public engagement. On campus, we have participated in a residence hall event, a graduate student case competition centered on fake news, and consulted with a student organization. The Learning Librarian, who was the instructor for the class, will participate as a guest speaker for two different campus conferences: the U-M Women of Color Task Force Annual Conference and a student-led conference at the U-M School of Information. Our goal for accepting these invitations is not to lecture the audience about fake news. Rather, we want to provide critical thinking opportunities that we can work through with the attendees.

One of the most interesting campus engagement opportunities involved working with an undergraduate student to create a series of educational slides featured on the Undergraduate Library's digital screen array. Much like the librarians, this student wanted to convey the complexity of the issue by avoiding the checklist approach to fake news. The Learning Librarian

met with the student several times to develop a series of questions that would help students engage with news in general. As an art student, the student then developed an artistic theme in a slide show that centered on the spreading of a fire to help in conveying critical thinking questions visually. These slides have been featured multiple times in the library.

Within the library community, two U-M librarians participated in the June 2017 Library Journal webinar series entitled “Fighting Fake News,” in which they described some of U-M’s efforts in addressing fake news, as well as offering other educational ideas. Critical thinking was also emphasized in that setting. For example, we suggested asking students for their own personal definitions of fake news before offering any of the standard definitions so that they could apply their own experiences of engaging with the news before seeing how someone else defined it. One of us has participated in a conversation with Alison J. Head, the principal investigator of the ACRL cofunded project, *How Do Students Consume News?*—a conversation that included other librarians who are addressing the issue of fake news. The instructor for the class has also presented at the fall 2017 Association of Research Libraries meeting to inform ARL library directors of different ways that libraries can “tackle” fake news. She has also completed interviews with library organizations, including the Michigan Academic Library Association. The U-M team has shared instruction ideas with other libraries. In sharing U-M’s ideas with the larger library community on how to critically engage with fake news, it is hoped that educational opportunities will arise where thoughtful approaches can be applied to encountering the news rather than using a checklist method.

The U-M Library has been approached by several groups in the Ann Arbor area and across the state of Michigan to talk about fake news. These groups include a local church, a Kiwanis Club, an interview for a student project at another local college, and a speaking engagement at a community college on the other side of the state. At this time, most of these engagements have not yet been completed, but we’re planning that, instead of a lecture-based lesson on one strategy of how to encounter the news, the speakers at these events will work to create critical thinking environments via discussions and interactive exercises.

The last significant area where U-M has engaged with the issue of fake news has been with the media. The media itself is a huge stakeholder in the issues surrounding fake news. In our conversations with the media, we have tried to emphasize the complex nature of the dissemination of fake news and how misleading information can be confusing. We want the

public to know that the library is an important place where difficult issues can be explored. The university put forward a press release when the course was approved, and the Associated Press picked up the story. We have been interviewed by local and Detroit media outlets and have served on a Sunday morning panel show, on a statewide public radio, and in multiple college newspapers. One of us was interviewed by *Vice Magazine*, which garnered a lot of attention. Internationally, we have been interviewed by reporters in Canada, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden. We were even invited to participate in a Detroit Press Club panel event.

CONCLUSION

At the U-M Library, we had the unique opportunity to develop and teach a stand-alone course devoted to fake news. The course has served as fertile soil for the cultivation multiple of information literacy efforts focused on growing educated and critically minded citizens. Even if you can't devote an entire class to fake news, a few editorial comments that bring assignments into a critical social context and making time for some brief related discussions can go a long way toward integrating real-world learning into what would otherwise be a rote instruction session. As students, our favorite teachers were always those who took "bird walks"—bringing in personal stories or discussing current events and artfully tying them back to the course content. These real-world connections make classes interesting and keep students engaged.

Grappling with the issues attendant to fake news can sometimes feel controversial and difficult. Critical engagement with the disordered information environment can involve calling out problematic social issues and making evident the role of powerful actors that aren't always in the best interests of civic society. It is our professional duty as academic librarians to help students develop the knowledge and skills needed to critically engage in information seeking and evaluation, both within the academy and outside the university. Bringing attention to challenges in the information environment is not the same as promoting a particular ideological viewpoint; we want students to think for themselves and move beyond uncritically endorsing information simply because it supports their preexisting beliefs.

The media exposure and community-wide attention that our fake news minicourse received has been edifying in affirming the desire of most people to be informed and to participate in a functional democratic society

fueled by real news. It has strengthened our commitment to critical information literacy and to cultivating students as educated citizens.

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