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Background interview by Elaine Lasda and Kelsey O'Brien for the book: All That's Not Fit to Print: Fake News and the Call to Action for Librarians and Information Professionals

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*Elaine Lasda, Associate Librarian for Social Welfare
Kelsey O'Brien, Information Literacy Librarian*

What is your background in librarianship?

EL: I received my M.L.S. in the mid 1990's -- the age of Netscape Navigator. Google was still a baby! I have been at my current place of work since 2001 in various capacities, having earned tenure in 2015. Prior to being at UAlbany, my library career included work as a circulation supervisor in a small liberal arts college, a brief stint as an adult services librarian in an urban public library, and I also spent six years as a part-time solo librarian in a non-profit trade association.

KO: I am an early career academic librarian working toward my tenure. Prior to working in college libraries, I was a Library Media Specialist at a high school and a Youth Services Librarian at a public library. I am the liaison for UAlbany's Writing and Critical Inquiry program, a required course for freshmen, so I spend a lot of my time working with first year students and helping them transition from high school to college research.

When do you recall first hearing about "fake news?" Did you envision it becoming a widespread problem? Did you see combatting it as the purview of librarians?

EL: I first heard the actual term "fake news" two or three years ago. I heard the term quite a bit after I first began to see many friends and family falling for spurious content and reposting it on social media. The strong information literacy mission of my current place of work made it seem obvious to me that librarians can be at the forefront of combating the spread of these stories in social media and elsewhere. Actually, I get a bit irate when non-library entities such as magazines or news outlets put themselves forth as the authority on helping the public discern fake news. I feel that these organizations are simply trying to shore up their brands as authoritative in order to retain advertisers and boost sales revenues. For the graduate level social science students and faculty that comprise the population with which I work most closely, fake news has not been a major issue as of this writing.

KO: "Fake news" is synonymous with the Trump administration for me. I remember Kellyanne Conway defending press secretary Spicer's use of "alternative facts," and the news media frenzy that followed. When talking about it with my colleagues, we speculated that at least the media attention might bring to light the importance of what librarians have been doing for a long time: helping people scrutinize and discern

accurate information. I didn't necessarily anticipate how widespread the problem would become, in terms of the alarming trend toward a complete disregard for established expertise, and the blatant efforts to spread misinformation.

How is fake news involved in your daily work? Please recount some specific examples of encounters with fake news in your work as a librarian.

***EL:** For the most part, I work with faculty and graduate students on helping them find credible, peer-reviewed sources for research projects. Thus far, the problem of this population using spurious content has not figured prominently. However, I don't see every student's assignment that is submitted to classes so I can't know for sure. I teach a class to MSW students on how to use and evaluate resources, and I give them an exercise to evaluate a biased source found on the Internet to help drive home the point that not everything in PDF format is original, scholarly research. Nonetheless, the social welfare program will soon be tailoring the curriculum of the MSW program to be more practical applications, community engagement, and social policy over traditional clinical practice. Insofar as my job is concerned, this will mean a greater reliance of the program on practical and policy sources, news and other documentation that is not necessarily scholarly peer-reviewed research. Helping students and faculty navigate these sources will likely mean that fake news discussions will figure more prominently once the curriculum is revised.*

***KO:** My teaching work with undergraduate students is largely grounded in metaliteracy, which focuses on helping students become mindful and reflective consumers and creators of information. As an extension of information literacy, metaliteracy goes beyond simply teaching students how to locate and retrieve information. In an increasingly complex information landscape, it has become essential that we teach students to become critical thinkers who recognize their roles as producers of information, particularly in online social environments in which they are constantly posting, sharing and remixing information (and potentially misinformation). I have worked with several colleagues in the SUNY system to create the Metaliteracy Badging System, an online series of educational exercises that are often assigned in conjunction with library instruction. In an exercise titled "Speaking Out" students read about John Seigenthaler Sr., a respected journalist and former administrative assistant to Robert Kennedy who, in a falsified Wikipedia entry, was inaccurately implicated in the Kennedy assassinations. After reading about this incident, students are asked to reflect on their own experiences with receiving and sharing misinformation, considering both the affective implications – how the experience made them feel – along with cognitive considerations – what strategies might they use to discern misinformation?*

We recently revised the series of metaliteracy exercises on evaluation, which was originally oriented around the CRAAP test (currency, relevance, accuracy, authority and purpose). In light of the prevailing charged information climate, we have now incorporated the concepts of filter bubbles and confirmation bias, encouraging students to reflect on their own feelings and behaviors, rather than simply checking off boxes for what makes a “good” source.

In your experience in working with either students or library patrons, why do you think people fall for fake news?

***EL:** A colleague who is a young professor and who is my Facebook friend posted a fake news story within the past year. I sent the professor a congratulatory message for posting something fake because I thought they were trying to get their students and followers on the social media platform to think about what to post. As it turned out, the professor had not examined the content carefully, and was instead provoked by the headline, so fired off the repost on their page. But I can't be judgmental on this one-- I will admit to having reposted items on Facebook where I only read the headline, and did not examine the article, the web address or any other information about the content, and got rooked myself. Provocative headlines and quick sound bites that confirm our fears about some issue or justify a prepossessed bias are the type of content that I think draw people in. When faced with something that confirms our fears and bias, we may be more tempted to believe the content without undertaking due diligence to verify the claims in the story.*

***KO:** Unfortunately, we have entered into a “post-truth” era in which the accuracy or authority of information is not always valued as much as how the information supports or refutes one’s worldview. I think our students are very aware that misinformation exists, particularly online. However, in a fast-paced information environment, fact checking takes time and effort, and it’s simply not a priority. We are also easily tricked by our own minds; social psychologist Daniel Gilbert found that we tend to remember the information we encounter first and most often, and that once we have accepted something as true, it’s hard to reverse that belief. This doesn’t bode well for the increasing percentage of the population that uses Facebook or Twitter as their primary news source; as we scroll through our news feeds we are often subconsciously absorbing a lot of misinformation that can stick in our minds even after later learning that it was inaccurate.*

What do you think librarians can do in the fight against fake news? Do you think there are new skills that we need to learn, or do you see it more as a shift of

existing skills to a new area? Please describe those skills whether they are new or existing.

EL: Librarians can continue to educate library users and the public about evaluation of information, particularly online content. For some librarians this may mean boning up on some typical characteristics of fake news stories, but this represents more of a shift in existing information evaluation and literacy skills for an online world, a 24-hour news cycle and the burgeoning of spurious, or at the very least rapidly and sloppily generated content. These skills include how to do background research, how to gather multiple viewpoints on a topic, how to assess the authority, accuracy, currency and veracity of online and other types of content. The newer aspect I think we need to consider is getting our message out of our own domain – I've heard it referred to as the "librarian echo chamber." Such skills would include effective marketing, partnering with entities that share our values of intellectual freedom and information literacy, and demonstrating the value of libraries as a public good. These are not new concepts for libraries, but we have not yet been effective in most cases at breaking out of that echo chamber. Even at my university, there is to a certain extent a need to quit preaching to each other and find ways to bring our message to the campus community in the form and language in which it will best be heard.

KO: I agree with Elaine that we need to broaden our reach beyond traditional library domains. The challenges presented by the current information climate call for a shift in our teaching that focuses less on format and more on critical thinking. It's no longer sufficient to simply teach students to use certain types of resources (i.e. only use library-vetted resources, and stay away from Google and Wikipedia). It's becoming increasingly vital that we teach students to take ownership of their learning and research, and responsibility for the roles they play in creating and spreading information, both within and beyond the classroom. In order to combat the fake news crisis, we need to prepare students to be responsible digital citizens who value truth and expertise over expediency.

What should librarians do when patrons insist that fake news is real?

EL: I haven't had this happen with my grad students or faculty, but one option would be to diplomatically pose some standard evaluative questions to get the patron thinking about how to verify the information, consider different frameworks for looking at the issue in question, assess the authority of the source, and so forth. I think a light approach would be best with experienced students and faculty. I wouldn't want to insult their intelligence as they likely view themselves as competent, if not expert, consumers

of information, but I would seek ways to inspire curiosity within the patron to learn more and explore the issue more deeply than one bit of (fake) content.

KO: Like Elaine, I haven't yet encountered any particularly defiant patrons, though I have witnessed students referring to less than reliable sources because they were the first results to show up in a Google search, or they conveniently fulfilled a particular information need. As academic institutions I think we need to encourage healthy, intellectual dialogue, and empower students to take a stance on the issues they believe in. Rather than taking the offensive approach and simply directing students to the "right" sources, we need to encourage them to self-reflect, check their own biases, ask questions, engage with a variety of perspectives, and back their claims with evidence and expertise.

Do you think it is possible for social media platforms to stop the spread of fake news? If so, what steps do you think they can take to accomplish this?

EL: Social media platforms could and should hire librarians to be their ambassadors! Librarians could provide educational content on information literacy concepts and best practices to social media users. Partnering with neutral arbiters of information such as libraries and librarians boosts both the credibility of the social media platform and raises the librarian expertise above and beyond our echo chamber.

KO: There is an initiative called 1Lib1Ref that calls on librarians to add credible citations to articles in Wikipedia. Projects like this are a great example of how we can work to improve existing social media platforms, which are often our students' initial access points for information.

What should library schools be doing to prepare the next generation of librarians to be able to fight fake news?

EL: One thing library schools could be doing, at least compared to when I was in library school in the 1990s, is offering coursework about metadata above and beyond traditional library cataloging techniques. This would include how to read html metadata and other technology related schemas. Also, teach aspiring librarians techniques for showing users how to understand the components of a web URL to determine the source of content, and how to explain where to locate trusted, unbiased information about web hoaxes. Give library students assignments on the evolution of information literacy issues, intellectual freedom, propaganda, and related concepts. The context of how we got where we are in today's information landscape will enable librarians to take

a more informed approach to handling the various situations that could arise as a result of a patron's acceptance of fake news as fact.

KO: *Thinking back on my own experience in library school, I think today's library students could benefit from more instruction on social media networks, along with our traditional tools of the trade such as research databases. It would help to have a better understanding of the ways in which information is distributed and ranked online (e.g. by platforms like Google and Facebook). In order to effectively prepare students to navigate a world of information, we need to help them properly leverage these tools, rather than simply instructing them to avoid them.*

What future challenges do you see in the fight against fake news?

EL: *As photo and video editing gets easier and more realistic, I think it will be more difficult to sway people away from believing falsified images. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. They also say, seeing is believing. As image editing becomes more sophisticated, some library users will not accept that photos or videos have been fraudulently doctored or are composites of multiple images, etc. Also, we are moving increasingly towards "niche" news outlets, where media consumers are able to confirm their own beliefs while limiting exposure to the free exchange of differing perspectives and ideas. I am concerned that what are now considered credible news outlets will be discredited among some of the niche outlets that have a conflicting bias, thus making it even more difficult to help library users understand and sort through the opinions and winnow out the facts.*

KO: *As technology becomes more sophisticated, and reliable sources are more easily imitated, we will no longer be able to rely on what Stephen Colbert coined as "truthiness." Information consumers will need to carefully interrogate any information they encounter online and investigate the source of the publication in order to make informed decisions about its credibility.*

Please add any comments or concerns that you have regarding fake news and librarianship.

Although we are both academic librarians at the same institution, our relationship to and interactions with the university community are quite different. Nonetheless, common themes are evident through our joint perspectives. There is clearly a vital need for improved information literacy for all types of library users, be they undergraduates, graduates, faculty or university staff. Librarians can be ever mindful of this need, while also treating library users with patience and respect to help them come to balanced, informed conclusions about the information they encounter, share and create, both within and outside of the classroom.