**Guest Editorial**

## Taking a Stand in the Post-Truth Era

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The time is now, the urgency is severe. We must take a stand in the face of fake news and the denigration of truth and expertise by those with power and influence. Those of us in the information business, whether we are librarians, other information professionals, or researchers, are uniquely positioned to contribute our expertise to addressing one of the most profoundly damaging issues of our time: disdain for expertise and for credible, fact-based information. We have the intellectual and practical tools to address these issues and we have a professional responsibility to employ them.

We currently live in a time of fake news, rampant misinformation, propaganda, so-called "alternative facts", and online clickbait. These challenges occur in a climate of anti-intellectualism and a refusal by many people to recognize expertise, as well as declining trust in mainstream media, particularly digital media. A recent BuzzFeed report that analyzed Facebook postings leading up to the 2016 U.S. election (https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/partisan-fb-pages analysis ?utm_ term= .rmV7ZQ0oL#.qsrVXyMr4) concludes that, "the more overtly partisan, misleading, or opinion-driven a post was, the more engagement the post would see, according to our data. Facebook, and the people using it, appears to reward the worst tendencies of these pages." This, of course, points us to the informational echo chambers in which we increasingly find ourselves. The report predicts that "…over time people will likely become more polarized because algorithms and friends continue to feed them information that pushes them further in this direction [of their opinions]."

This confluence of issues constitutes a crisis for democracy and good governance (which depends on informed voters), for health and well-being (because so much health information is now sourced through the internet), for success in academia (because selection and evaluation of appropriate academic

information sources is dependent on solid digital literacy skills), and for success in the workplace (because decision-making must be made on the basis of credible evidence).

What can information professionals do to counter these challenges? First, we must engage with the issues and model best information practices. We need to express our concerns publicly, work to educate our representatives at all levels of government about these issues, advocate for digital literacy, and teach it where we can. Those of us who teach future information professionals need to engage with these issues in the classroom, encourage advocacy and engagement outside of the classroom by our students, teach advocacy skills, teach the importance of digital literacy, and ensure that our students are digitally literate themselves. We also need to prepare our students to teach digital literacy skills to others.

What is digital literacy? I define it the set of skills, knowledge and attitudes required to access digital information effectively, efficiently, and ethically. It includes knowing how to interpret and evaluate information, and how to use information to make meaning across a range of contexts: in decision-making, in creative activities, in academic pursuits, in daily life, and in the workplace.

There are many challenges to digital literacy education, however. We know that people greatly overestimate their digital literacy skills, and that many people do not understand the context of information—how or why it is produced, nor the purposes for which different types of information are made available. In addition, we know that much information seeking is based on habit and convenience. It is also the case that information practices are socially and culturally situated, mediated, and co-constructed with others in their social and cultural contexts. Information seeking is also a dynamic process as information needs may arise or dissipate quickly, and "need" is changeable; thus, linear models of information seeking are misleading.

We also know that there are many cognitive challenges to be overcome. People are irrational in their thinking. Impressions, once formed, tend to persevere, so even when confronted with solid evidence, people tend not to revise their beliefs. In addition, people are susceptible to confirmation bias, so that they embrace information that supports their beliefs, and reject contradictory information. In fact, people actually experience pleasure (via a dopamine rush) when processing information supporting their beliefs. People are particularly resistant to changing beliefs when those beliefs are central to their identity. In the face of counterevidence, people discount its source, form counterarguments,

socially validate their position, and selectively avoid new information. They are especially resistant to arguments against their political beliefs, so that emotion, rather than reason, dominates. In addition, all of us are more adept at identifying weaknesses in others' arguments than in our own positions.

There are more challenges. We know that source memory is fragile and easily confused (i.e., people have a hard time recalling the source of "facts," of what they "know" to be true), so subjecting preconceived ideas or opinions to critical evaluation is tricky. People tend to trust news on the basis of who has shared it with them, rather than its source (http://mediainsight.org/Pages/'Who-Shared-It'-How-Americans-Decide-What-News-to-Trust-on-Social-Media.aspx). Thus, teaching people to evaluate information is not as straightforward as simply providing lists of evaluative criteria. It is also the case that a significant driver of decision-making is social conformity, so that if one's neighbors are doing something, one is more inclined to do the same. If it is "normal" to think critically and to seek balanced information, then that behavior becomes more widespread. However, when extreme views and informational echo-chambers are the norm, then attempts to counter those norms are challenging.

One might imagine that digital literacy should and could be learned through primary and secondary school. However, many school teachers are not digitally literate themselves, and even when curricular mandates to teach digital literacy are in place, information skills are typically not tested, and what is not tested is given short shrift. My own research in Canada and the U.S. shows that in higher education contexts, digital literacy instruction is often limited, poorly resourced, unsystematic, and badly implemented. Public libraries sometimes do not provide opportunities to learn digital literacy, and librarians may not be viewed as digital literacy experts.

Despite these myriad challenges, it is important to prepare information professionals to teach digital literacy. Librarians have an historical role in teaching this skill set, and information professionals have expert preparation in digital literacy skills: they understand how information is structured, how to search expertly, how to manipulate information for use, and how to do all this efficiently, effectively, and ethically. However, preparation for teaching these skills to others is critical. Teaching is a skill set, a science as well as an art. It is not learned purely "on the job". Learning to teach digital literacy skills should include the following:

- basic digital literacy concepts,
- needs assessment,
- instructional strategies (pedagogy/andragogy),

- online instruction strategies,
- learning theory,
- instructional design,
- gamification,
- differentiated instruction,
- program planning and implementation, and
- assessment and evaluation.

A thorough grounding in these areas will help to prepare future information professionals to tackle the challenge of teaching digital literacy.

We in the information field have the expertise to address the challenges of fake news and misinformation. We must assert that expertise, educate and prepare others with that expertise, and advocate for the importance of digital literacy. We can collaborate with others who are trying to tackle these issues, including journalists, educators, and the media. We can cultivate the soft power we already have as a source for trusted information. But we must also keep the long term in mind; these issues are serious and significant, and there are no quick fixes (Lor, 2018).

## FURTHER READING

Guess, A., Nyhan, B.,& Reifler, J. (2018). Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. European Research Council, January 9, 2018. https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf

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Lor, P. J. (2018). Democracy, information, and libraries in a time of post-truth discourse, *Library Management*, *39*(5): 307-321. https://doi.org/10.1108/ LM-06-2017-0061

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