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Combating “Fake News” Through Deepening Our Philosophical Roots

by Preston Salisbury - Assistant Professor - Monographic Cataloger - Mississippi State University Libraries

I. Fake news and information literacy education

- a. While the term “fake news” is relatively new, the concept of disinformation has existed a long time.
- b. While the internet has perhaps increased the visibility of “fake news,” disinformation exists in print as well as electronic, and sometimes from major publications as well as self-published.
- c. Information literacy education, as generally practiced, has multiple weaknesses:
 - i. It tends to be focused on tools and skills rather than educating students as to the nature of information itself (McDonough, 2015, 40-42).
 - ii. It tends to focus almost exclusively on electronic disinformation, although disinformation also exists in print form.
 1. When this is combined with the fact that libraries collect print disinformation, this oversight amounts to a substantial problem.
 2. David Icke (noted anti-Semite and conspiracy

theorist), recently recommended by Alice Walker, has his books in hundreds of libraries. The majority are public libraries.

- iii. There is also not enough education on the tendency of algorithms to provide echo chambers or to promote disinformation and bigotry (Grady). People have high levels of confidence in the quality of search engine results without understanding how search engines work (Noble, 2018, 53).
- iv. People often think they are better at identifying fake news than they really are (Auberry, 2018, 185).
- v. Information literacy education is generally voluntary,

especially in the public library.

- d. In order to combat all forms of fake news, we need an understanding of what information is, and we need to consider carefully whether libraries are required to supply disinformation.
- e. Given that “we are the product that Google sells to advertisers” (Noble, 2018, 162), does the library have a responsibility to warn users regarding privacy concerns before allowing internet access, and could this provide a gateway towards more comprehensive and universal information literacy education?

II. What is information?

- a. Our understanding of information “is problematic because its claims are far too simplistic and reductionistic of the complexities of sense, knowledge, and agency in the world and because a careful examination of its own claims and foundational models reveals vast and deep exclusions and contradictions” (Day, 2001, 117).
- b. The information age requires a re-contextualization of what power means and what the responsibilities are of those who wield power.
 - i. The digital divide is not merely an access divide, but is also a power divide in that it results in discrimination and dependency (Floridi, 2001, 3).
 - ii. This power is not the same as socio-economic power, but it may have similar long-term consequences (Floridi, 2001, 2).
- c. There are several competing theories of information. They have various strengths and weaknesses.
 - i. The semantic approach defines information as “well-formed, meaningful, and truthful data” (Floridi, 2011, 31).
 1. This means that information does not include falsehood
 2. This in turn requires a second concept, disinformation, to cover things generally included in the term “information” which are not “well-formed, meaningful, [or] truthful.”
 - ii. Many information theories approach information syntactically or from a computer science background. These theories have their place, but they may not cover all of the ways in which libraries use information (which are primarily focused on human users.)
 1. Libraries are “user-centered” (Cole, Napier, and Marcum, 2015, 107). This requires a theory and definition of information that places the user, rather than the information itself, at the forefront.
 2. Libraries need a theory of information that can provide the grounding for all of the basic tasks of the profession while maintaining the user-focused nature of librarianship.
- d. There are also several theories of truth. Some are created for passive viewers, seemingly outside a closed system. For the purpose of information literacy, it is probably best to have a theory which views truth as “about constructing and handling informational artifacts and interacting with them successfully, not merely experiencing them passively” (Floridi, 2011, 208). In other words, users of libraries need to understand how to interact with information as developers, not merely observers or cogs in a machine.

III. What is fake news?

- a. If our definition of “information” does not include fake news (such as the semantic theory of information) it is necessary to provide a definition of “disinformation” to accompany the definition of “information.”
- b. “The distinguishing feature of disinformation is that its function is to mislead people” (Fallis, 2015, 413).
 - i. This important definition helps to include misleading statements which are repeated by people who believe them. 9/11 truthers or many of those who called President Obama’s citizenship into question believed what they said, but they were themselves misled by disinformation, so their statements are also disinformation.
 - ii. This definition also helps by preventing people from using their opposition to a specific religion or field of thought to classify it as disinformation, because the function of those things is not disinformation.
- c. Fake news is therefore anything which appears as information but has the function of misleading people rather than informing them.

IV. What does the Library Bill of Rights require?

- a. “Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view” (LBOR, Article II)
 - i. Is falsehood a point of view?
 1. Does “inclusivity” include falsehood? Not in “Diversity in Collection Development” which is an ALA interpretation of Article II.
 2. “Access to all content legally available” should be provided, however.
 - a. Access can be provided via interlibrary loan
 - b. Provision of internet access also includes provision of access to conspiracy theorists, such as sources cited by mass-murderer Dylann Roof (Noble, 2018, 111).
 - ii. Libraries will provide access to fake news as long as the internet remains uncensored. There is no requirement for libraries to compound the problem by putting fake news sources on the shelves.
- b. What about when people request an item? Do people want to be deceived? Wilkinson (2015, 27) argued no, but acknowledged that people also do not wish to change their points of view, and might prefer an echo chamber of falsehoods to truth.
 - i. Once again, if the content is legally available it should be provided.
 - ii. Handled correctly, this could be a teaching moment for the library user.
- c. The focus for the library should be on the quality of information provided (Fallis, 2015, 402) and that the information provided is representative of all points of view, inclusive, and diverse (Diversity in Collection Development).
- d. If, as Fallis stated, the function of disinformation is to deceive people, it is not necessarily protected by the Library Bill of Rights as its function is neither to inform, enlighten, or entertain people.
 - i. Actual disinformation probably does not accomplish any of the goals of Article I of the Library Bill of Rights.
 - ii. Actual disinformation is also likely not protected by Article II.

V. Questions that need to be answered

- a. Which definition of information best suits the library profession and can include all of the tasks of librarianship?
- b. Are libraries required to provide access to fake news?
- c. Do “points-of-view” extend to blatantly false information (holocaust denial or Wakefield’s discredited study on the relationship of the MMR vaccine to autism?)
- d. What can be done to make information literacy education more suited to the needs of library users (particularly at public libraries, where there is often less time, personnel, and budget for such efforts)?
- e. How can a collection policy be written which neither requires the library to collect fake news nor consists of censorship?

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