Research Note

An Open Letter to Librarians: Ethical Imperatives in Post-truth America

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Abstract: This paper discusses the growing challenge that librarians face due to inaccurate, misleading, and flat-out false news ("fake news"), which is also creating new issues for our democratic societies in the age of 24-hour, instantly accessible, and always-changing news. The author explores the question of a librarian's ethical responsibilities related to fake news, and the implications for our society. However, this growing problem of fake news presents a unique opportunity for librarians to combine the job's information-related expertise and new technologies to evolve the role of librarian into information curator.

Do libraries and librarians have ethical responsibilities within American society given the predominance of fake news and the categorization of real news as being fake? What are those responsibilities and how can they have an impact in shaping the future of information literacy? These are questions, amongst others, I will explore in this paper. I will seek to build a case that librarians have a central role to play in solving this endemic problem. My goal is to show how a well-educated, functional, liberal democracy is, in-part, resultant of libraries, how the principles of librarianship could offer remedy to the post-truth campaigns of misinformation in America, and the ethical obligation I believe librarians carry in this environment.

Many have written on the topic of fake news. The Internet is teeming with accounts of fake news, poor journalism, and claims of outright lies. Who, and what, is to be believed? No longer are the days when a few major news outlets were available on cable television for the day's news, nor is it primarily consumed via print from trusted, well-known newspapers. The rise of the Internet has given way to the decline of traditional media sources. In a recent fact sheet, the Pew Research Center cites the, "newspaper workforce has shrunk by about 20,000 positions, or 39 percent, in the last 20 years."[1] Meanwhile, online media continues to grow. The same fact sheet shows 28 percent of adults consume news digitally, whereas only a decade ago the primary source of news was in print. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that its "average monthly unique visitors for the third quarter of 2015 was anywhere from two to 78 times greater than average Sunday circulation for the same period."

However, not all media comes from such reputable sources. "The digital revolution drastically lowers the costs of copying and distributing information."[2] What was once the domain of institutional media has transformed and is now available for the masses to contribute. In other words, any person with an Internet connection, and some

modicum of skill, can put together a "real" looking "news" website or blog and it is left to the consumer to interpret the truth. Websites such as Facebook also make it very easy for stories such as these to be circulated quickly, especially when clever authors use catchy, provocative words and imagery. Tom Regan tells us that while individual thoughts and feelings may not settle moral issues, neither can the feelings of the masses.[3] "Questions of right and wrong cannot be answered just by counting heads." This is one, of many, dangers of questionable stories being shared rapidly via social media. The number of likes and shares a story gets may be good for Facebook advertising dollars, but it is not necessarily a good thing for public consumption. Just because a story becomes popular does not make it true. In the face of such constant, viral information flows, the necessity for information literacy becomes paramount to one's understanding of the world around them.

Nevertheless, let us take a moment to examine a couple of key pieces of information. At the outset, I said I am going to show how we need librarians to maintain our democratic culture and how they can help (and are morally obligated to help) with the problem of fake news. First, we need to understand what fake news is all about. What is news? Merriam-Webster defines it as, "a report of recent events," or, "previously unknown information," and, "material reported in a newspaper or news periodical or on a newscast."[4] What about fake? The same dictionary defines it as, noun, "one that is not what it purports to be," or, adjective, "not true or real." Therefore, by these definitions, fake news would be a report or previously unknown information that is not what it purports to be, or descriptively is not true, and it appears in news media in some form, in our case, online.

What about truth? From a philosophical perspective, can anything really be true? There are numerous theories regarding truth, of which I will present a few of the leading ones. The Correspondence Theory states that, "for any proposition p, p is true if and only if it corresponds to fact."[5] Later came Tarski's Semantic Theory, which asks the question, "Under which condition is that proposition true?" By contrast, there is the Redundancy Theory, which does not require a proposition to bear relation to something else to be true; instead, it suggests the concept of truth allows for indirect reference. For example, if we say something "is true," then truth is revealed by way of recognizing it would be redundant to add this phrase to the proposition. While there may be conflicting philosophical perspectives about truth, a common theme appears to be that truth is a property that through logical reasoning can be obtained. This brings us back to the concept of the fakeness of the news. I would argue then, to claim a published report of information is not true rests on an assertion that through logical reasoning the propositions contained within it cannot obtain truth either through relation to fact, nor conditionally, nor implicitly. This is to say the information contained within a fake news report is wholly false.

Is every fake news story necessarily entirely false though? A commonly coined phrase as of late is the "alternate fact." (As an aside, from the philosophical arguments above, there can be no such thing as an alternate fact, unless defined as an additional, optional piece of information as opposed to its mainstream application in which it is used to describe a difference of opinion on the matter of whether or not something is factually true.) I will submit that perhaps some news categorized as fake contains some factually true information and some factually false information. The lines are often blurred. Again, it is left to the consumer to interpret the information one reads or hears. This is where I think it is important we, and I mean we as information consumers and as American citizens, need to attempt to understand if the information presented in fake news stories is really misinformation or disinformation. Floridi defines a proposition as factual semantic information, "if and only if p is (constituted by) well-formed, meaningful, and veridical data."[6] He goes on to say this definition, "clarifies the fact that false information is not a genuine type of information." When semantic content is false, he says, it is classified as misinformation. However, he makes an important distinction that if the source of the information is aware that it is not true, and then it becomes disinformation. This is otherwise known as a lie. I will note here Floridi also comments that both misinformation and disinformation are "ethically censurable." The point is that fake news comes in many flavors, from the mildly annoying to the deeply troubling as measured in degrees of how serious we should be paying attention and how much effort should be put forth to challenge the sources of the information. This leads to a

natural question then, what can or should be done about it?

Before I launch headfirst into a call to arms on the American Library Association (ALA) to rally the librarian troops and formalize a new charter of activism against the fake news engine, I would like to outline another concept as background for the assault. What is it about libraries that is tied to our functioning democracy? They are inextricably connected to our Constitutional protection afforded in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, that our government cannot abridge our freedom of speech. Libraries are centers for information, places where free speech is exercised and shared. As stated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Libraries are… essential to the functioning of a democratic society… libraries are the great symbols of the freedom of the mind." They are centers for knowledge, and as great custodians of our rights, they ensure the public has access to varying perspectives. More importantly, this access is free to all citizens, enabling "the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process" and "discourse among informed citizens [to assure] civil society."[7] Look at the Seattle Public Library, for example, whose purpose, as stated within its selection and withdrawal of materials policy, is to enlighten, empower, and inform the people within our community. [8] "The Library and its board of trustees uphold the democratic right to freely express their thoughts and ideas, both popular and unpopular. We support the right of each individual to privately read, listen, and view the full range of published thought and ideas." Further, the library's collection objectives, which come at the direction of the Librarian, aim to be, "an unbiased and diverse source of information" and its selection policy includes goals to "develop the social awareness and knowledge needed for self-government and successful participation in a diverse community" and to "educate and inform." Lastly, while the library seeks to build a diverse collection, it does not endorse any particular viewpoint expressed in those materials.

Ostensibly, a primary function of libraries is to foment information literacy amongst the public. As seen with the Seattle Public Library, a key tool in a library's arsenal is its collection, the actual content in which it provides for the development of well-rounded literacy skills. Moreover, the key person behind the collection is the librarian, who carries the burden and discretion for adding or removing items from it. So, what is the guiding force that helps the librarian in his or her quest of building a collection that will assist in holding up to the lofty standard of maintaining our democratic and free society? It is a code of ethics. The ALA codified a guiding set of ethical principles by which all American librarians are to follow. In this code, the ALA acknowledges librarians, "significantly influence, or control the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information."[9] An important feature of the librarians' code of ethics is that it does not set forth to cover all possible situations, but instead serves as a framework within which ethical decision-making should occur throughout the profession. I ask then, in the current environment of politically motivated misinformation and disinformation campaigns that presumably aim to manipulate many for the benefit of the few, what obligations, if any, do librarians have? Professionally, there appear to be clear opportunities present, such as striving for excellence to be leaders in shaping public opinion in a rapidly evolving information environment. In my opinion, this opportunity has significant upward potential. In a separate report by the Pew Research Center, 37 percent of people surveyed felt libraries help "a lot" when it comes to helping them decide what information they can trust, and another 37 percent believed libraries helped "somewhat" in this regard.[10] Sentiment amongst Americans already points towards libraries being sources of trusted and respected information leaders. This should be leveraged further, particularly now when this service is in such great demand. But from an ethical standpoint, this isn't just an example of what libraries could be doing a better job at, I believe it's an example of something libraries are ethically responsible to tackle head on. The stakes are too high. The very fabric of our democracy is at risk. The ALAs very own code of ethics outline their responsibilities within "a political system grounded in and informed citizenry," including their "special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations."[11]

The role of American academic librarians in developing information literacy dates back to the 19th century, according to Donald Barclay, a deputy university librarian at the University of California—Merced.[i] "Evidence exists of library instruction dating back to the 1820s at Harvard University."[ii] As time progressed, the phrase "information literacy" became synonymous with the duties of academic librarians. "Rather than being limited to locating items in a given library, information literacy recognized that students needed to be equipped with skills required to identify, organize and cite information. More than that, it focused on the ability to critically evaluate the credibility and appropriateness of information sources." He goes on to say how the challenges faced by students in today's information environment are much more difficult given the vastness of information availability. He points towards a revised Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education released by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) that includes the concept that "authority is constructed and contextual."[12] This framework suggests it is the responsibility of the researcher to understand the context within which information is presented, from which the level of authority or veracity can be drawn. This bears striking resemblances to the semantic theory of truth, which burdens us with determining the conditions in which truth can be obtained, and Floridi's definition of factual semantic information requiring meaningful and veridical data. While I agree an informed citizenry presupposes citizens bear an equivalent share of responsibility to actively seek out and validate information sources before making decisions and drawing conclusions, I think Barclay's claim that putting all of the resources of information literacy development in the hands of higher, secondary, and primary education alone will not be the panacea for "a future of election results and public policies based on whatever information – credible or not – bubbles to the top of the social media noise machine."[13] No, I believe the answer involves another layer, a technological layer that brings to the forefront the expertise and diligence of the community of librarians.

What can we expect rational, economically focused, technology corporations will do in the face of the fake news threat? I say threat because the core engine Facebook uses to bubble up stories based on how many clicks they can extract is the same engine that rapidly and widely distributes many of the fake news stories. Are customers going to leave? Are advertising dollars going to shrink? Naturally, we can expect Facebook will react in a way that will best serve its self-interests. We can also expect the solution will be a technological one. I will not speculate as to what exactly Facebook plans to do, but Mark Zuckerberg has alluded to some possibilities including, stronger detection, easy reporting, third party verification, and disrupting fake news economics.[14] As positive as his message appears to be, I cannot help but raise an eyebrow because none of these are reasons why Facebook is in business. Facebook's mission statement says its goal "is to give people the power to share."[15] The bottom line is this: the more people sharing things, the more clicks, the more money Facebook the business makes. That said, I believe there is potential in the concept of third party verification. I do not mean Facebook's selected "fact checking organizations" of which Zuckerberg lists none. Specifically, I mean librarians. What if partnerships between libraries and social media companies existed and a technological gateway were developed that enabled the entire American community of librarians to tag and archive social media news stories in localized collections? An algorithm could be imagined that leverages concepts from natural language processing, such as sentiment analysis, and flags social media news stories based on a level of sensitivity:

$$\text{Sensitivity} = D \times (L + E_1 + E_t) \times (S_1 + S_n)$$

Where D equals the total distribution, or number of times a social media story has been shared, L equals the number of "likes," E equals the number of "emojis" by type, and S equals the number of instances of sentiments captured in comment threads by type. Stories flagged in such a manner could be sent to a national queue where any librarian could opt to review a story, prioritized by the perceived level of attention, and the type of attention it is actively

[i] http://theconversation.com/institutions/university-of-california-merced-2056

[ii] http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1300/J120v24n51_06?needAccess=true

receiving on a social media platform. Librarians could then choose whether they would include the story in their library's collection, and the story itself could be tagged on the social media platform with some type of notification such as "reviewed and (excluded, or) included in the collections of the following public libraries: [names]." The alternatives include letting social media giants such as Facebook write the rules for what they want to allow people to share and what is viewed, or even noble sounding projects such as fakenewschallenge.org. This project's published goal "is to address the problem of fake news by organizing a competition to foster development of tools to help human fact checkers identify hoaxes and deliberate misinformation in news stories using machine learning, natural language processing and artificial intelligence."[16] Outside of the challenge of engineering such artificial intelligence technologies, I can only imagine the challenge of coding ethics into a robot is a monumental task that doesn't even appear to be one of the criteria posed by this fact-checking project.

While I propose one possible avenue for librarians to consider, I concede it likely is not a silver bullet solution to the problem. If anything, it is an example of a way of thinking that does not appear to currently be presently employed by libraries. This is not to say libraries in this country are technologically deficient *en masse*. Again, my point is that I see what appears to be a looming opportunity for librarians to re-engage with us all and to take our information literacy skills as a nation to the 21st century. Indeed, I believe I have shown that it is their ethical responsibility both professionally and as information leaders.

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[3] Regan, Tom. 2005. "Introduction to Moral Reasoning," *Information Ethics*. Accessed Mar. 2017 <tomregan.free.fr>.

[4] "News | Definition of News by Merriam Webster." Merriam-Webster. n.d. Accessed Mar. 2017 <www.merriam-webster.com>.

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Barclay, Donald. "The Challenge Facing Libraries in an Era of Fake News." *The Conversation*. 5 January 2017. Accessed Mar. 2017 <www.usnews.com>.

[14] Zuckerberg, Mark. 18 November 2016. In Facebook [User Page.] Accessed Mar. 2017 <www.facebook.com>.

[15] "Facebook – Resources." Facebook. n.d. Accessed Mar. 2017 <investor.fb.com>.

[16] "Fake News Challenge." Fake News Challenge. n.d. Accessed Mar. 2017 <www.fakenewschallenge.org>.