

Teaching Critical Evaluation of News in a (Mis)Information Environment

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Abstract

Oxford Dictionaries declared post-truth as the 2016 Word of the Year, and it has become almost impossible to avoid commentary about “fake news”. This change has provided an unprecedented opportunity for librarians to contribute expertise, teach critical thinking, collaborate with faculty, re-evaluate our own practices, and increase our emphasis on evaluating information -- not just finding it. In this panel presentation, four librarians from three academic libraries shared their strategies and approaches for increasing students’ ability to critically evaluate news. Presenters represented a community college, CSU, and UC. They highlighted successes and challenges in teaching critical evaluation of news sources, reflected on what practices have been most effective, and discussed them in the context of information literacy frames.

Panelists & Session Content

Shonn Haren is the Library Instruction Coordinator at Cal Poly Pomona, where he also serves as liaison librarian for Anthropology, English, Geography, Psychology and Sociology. He received his Master of Library and Information Science from San Jose State University in 2013 and also holds a Master of Arts in History from the University of California, Riverside, which he received in 2010.

Shonn Haren provided a brief overview of instruction efforts regarding fake news at Cal Poly Pomona. He briefly described the workshops he had put on, and the definition he was using to describe what fake news was. He discussed student attendance at his workshops and detailed how he used active learning strategies like breaking his audience into groups to analyze and critique fake news articles, or used the Factitious app to help the audience identify fake news stories. He also briefly discussed the LibGuide he created to help students find access to fact checking tools and outlined plans to include lessons on fake news in Cal Poly Pomona’s for-credit course.

Sara Davidson Squibb is Head of Research and Learning Services at the University of California Merced, Library. Sara holds a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, and an MLIS from the University of British Columbia (UBC). At UC Merced's rapidly expanding campus, she enjoys supporting student and faculty research needs by connecting them to relevant library resources and services and collaborating with campus partners to embed information literacy into curriculum.

Sara shared her library's spring 2017 news evaluation campaign -- *Be Aware: Evaluate Your News Evaluation*. The campaign's inspiration came from Vanessa Otero's news chart. The exhibit included a revision of her graphic along with 12 posters each representing a news source. An accompanying digital exhibit included information on the current news environment and strategies for news evaluation.

Librarians also organized events. Dr. Vincent's talk "Fostering More Accurate Science Coverage" pointed to the efforts of climatefeedback.org to promote critical thinking. A workshop led by librarians and Writing faculty, in conjunction with the campus' Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning, focused on news evaluation strategies for classroom use.

Librarians created a jigsaw lesson plan on news evaluation and taught it in selected writing classes. They asked students to consider tone, evidence, news type, and corroboration in the evaluation process. Librarians also shared resources (e.g. Media Bias/Fact Check and AllSides) for learning more about news sources' perspectives. The campaign's fourth component included FB postings and a FB Live event about fake news.

Sara considered the instructional component to be the most effective portion of the campaign due to the opportunity for deeper conversations with students. However, the special events and exhibit reached an audience beyond students and showcased the library's role in the evaluation of information. While the FB Live events had over 2,200 views, each FB posting had a reach of 350-500 but lacked engagement in the form of likes or comments.

The work of this campaign aligned most closely with the *Authority is Constructed and Contextual* frame, in the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, due to the focus on critical examination of evidence, origins, and context. Since the campaign, librarians have taught critical thinking and web evaluation, incorporating the work of Mike Caulfield, in Summer Bridge programming.

Donald Barclay, Deputy University Librarian at the University of California, Merced, has worked as an academic librarian since 1990, initially focusing on reference and instruction before transitioning into library administration. He has a long-standing interest in teaching students the subtle art of evaluating information, and this interest has only sharpened since fake news started making headlines in 2016. A prolific writer, he has published a number of books on library topics. His latest book, *Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies*, is being published by Roman-Littlefield in June 2016.

Donald briefly covered the history of fake news (which long pre-dates the Digital Age) and the ways digital technology has both changed, and not changed, the nature of fake news as it is being experienced in the twenty-first century.

The gist of his talk was on the question of whether or not librarians should strive for political neutrality when teaching about fake news. The problem with taking a political stand is that doing so may cause some of the students who disagree to tune out the librarian's message.

While it is up to each librarian to decide if and when political neutrality is the right approach, Donald provided examples of topics that could illustrate how fake news works while setting off no (or at least very few) political alarm bells.

One approach is to use a historical topic of interest to students. The example Donald used was the Apollo Moon landings, which conspiracy theorists have labeled as fake but for which there exists mountains of credible evidence proving beyond any reasonable doubt that the landings were real.

A different approach is to use a topic which directly touches on the lives of students without being political. One such example Donald presented are college rankings. Students and parents tend to put tremendous weight on getting into a highly ranked college or university, but there is plenty of evidence that such rankings are fake news because they are based on bad data and are not as objective as they seem to be. Another similar example are the many articles and social media postings chastising Millennials as being lazy, spoiled, ungrateful, and so on. Since most college students are the victims of such slanders, getting students involved in showing why the slanders are fake news should not be difficult.

Ellen Carey is Librarian and Assistant Professor at Santa Barbara City College, where she coordinates information literacy instruction programming and takes the lead on the library's assessment projects. Ellen is passionate about community college education and is committed to equity-based instruction. Her interests include social-emotional learning, online pedagogy, and universal design for instruction. She has presented on the ACRL Framework, online information literacy instruction, design thinking and curriculum development, and the intersection between scientific, media, and information literacies. Ellen holds an MSLIS from Simmons College and a BA in Critical Social Thought from Mount Holyoke College.

Ellen shared strategies SBCC librarians have used to engage students in thinking critically about information sources, all of which are grounded in their *ACRL Framework*-based approach to instruction.

The *P.R.O.V.E.N Source Evaluation Questions* emphasize the *process* students should go through to determine the appropriateness of a particular source for a specific purpose, rather than the *state* of the source as definitively credible or not. The *Questions* are used in face-to-face instruction and are embedded into the library's research guides.

Ellen uses a *Real vs. Fake News* research guide in blog posts, course research guides, and research workshops. Students in the 1-credit Library 101 course review the research guide and participate in an online discussion in which they answer questions about how fake news has affected them and how to avoid it. Many students find this assignment especially eye-opening.

During Spring 2017, Ellen co-presented a faculty colloquium on *Pseudoscience and Scientific Literacy*, that was well-attended and covered by the student newspaper.

Finally, Ellen described a project to develop online Research and Information Literacy Modules that address a wide range of information literacy topics, including fake news. These Modules, which include a subscription to the Credo's InfoLit Modules as well as content created by SBCC librarians, are used on the library's "Tutorials" webpage, in individual research guides, and as part of face-to-face and online instruction.

One challenge librarians face is that some students are *more* overwhelmed when they

realize the prevalence of fake news, and may take what they learn about it to mean they shouldn't trust *any* sources. But providing resources, instruction, and events at SBCC about fake news raises student and faculty awareness, keeps the conversation going, and centers librarians as those who can help both students and faculty navigate this information ecosystem.

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