### Research article

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# Alternative Facts, Fake News, Conflicting Perceptions, & Their Relevance to Library and Information Professionals

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**Abstract:** This article addresses contemporary and emerging issues involving perceptions of "truth," particularly truth in social networking and other web environments. It is a work primarily tackling issues concerning perceptions of truth in the United States of America with a lesser emphasis on their impact on other developed nations. Heuristics (trial and error lessons) derived from the author's tacit knowledge gained in the political arena communicating factual information to legislators and their staff under the American constitutional right to petition for "redress of grievances" are provided. Research dealing with the well-documented predisposition of people, both well and poorly-educated, to seek out information supporting their existing views is considered. Also reviewed are the implications of the increased availability of disinformation and misinformation from hostile, mercenary, illegal, alt-right, alt-left and other contentious online sources. The essay concludes with the examination of the feasibility of a spectrum of possible roles to be played by libraries and information centers and their personnel in support of a broader identification and provision of validated facts at a time of overabundance in often unreliable electronic information.

Keywords: Cyberfraud; clickbait; heuristics; alt-right; fake facts

### 1 Conflicting perceptions over meaning in the past political world

Former colonies, such as the United States of America, have often retained the English right to request a monarch to implement or restrict some action. Within the U.S. republic this right to petition the country's national government is enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Similar guarantees of the public's right to request changes in government policies have been enacted by the legislatures of the fifty American states (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). In practice, this right to petition has included the entitlement to request meetings on issues of concern with members (and/or their aides) of the federal House of Representatives and Senate, the two components of the national U. S. Congress. In recent years these discussions have addressed such matters as federal funding for library programs, intellectual freedom, copyright, and the filtering of online sources of information.

A number of years ago the author was new to a senior library administrative position in a Midwestern American state. At the time, federal funding for library and information services was in flux. As has often been the case, it was threatened with elimination. That situation, as well as prior experience training library advocates, led to the author serving in sequence as chair of the state library association's legislative committee and Federal Relations Coordinator. The latter position, present in every state's library association,

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has a specific charge, "this person's role is to coordinate the promotion of federal legislation within the state based upon information and directions received from the ALA Washington Office" (Arkansas Library Association, 2018).

In addition to ongoing communications responsibilities, the Federal Relations Coordinator is usually responsible for encouraging library and information representation for the once a year *National Library Legislative Day*, held as a two-day event in Washington, DC and facilitated by the American Library Association (American Library Association, 2018). Prior to the annual gathering a Federal Relations Coordinator typically works closely with state library agency staff and other members of the public, academic, and school library communities to develop—and confirm—evidence on how federal dollars are making possible effective library and information services for the residents of the state and its congressional districts. Decades of experience have shown how this process can mobilize practitioners and supporters across the wide spectrum of the U. S. library and information world.

On the first day, those arriving in Washington receive legislative updates and training in conveying to legislators and/or their aides the facts about current library needs and the successes made possible by past federal support. The next day involves previously scheduled meetings with members of the state's congressional delegation and/or their staff. Efforts are made, seldom fully successful, to secure representation by librarians, trustees, and friends from all the Midwest state's congressional districts.

Over the years the author traveled to Washington for *National Library Legislative Day* several tacit knowledge heuristics (trial-and-error lessons) were regularly in evidence.

- The state's senatorial and congressional offices saw meeting with library supporters as positive, particularly if the supporters were from the same state (Senate) or the same congressional district (House of Representatives);
- 2. Senators, representatives, and their staff members trusted the data provided by library supporters on the benefits provided to their state and/or congressional district.
- 3. Even though they believed the information provided by library supporters, a number of legislators and their staff members remained philosophically opposed to federal financial assistance for library and information services. Traditional conservatives often opposed such funding because they perceived library support as a purely local matter for municipalities and counties or, more rarely, for additional assistance by state governments.
- 4. On occasion, a strongly negative stance towards all library funding could reflect a libertarian opposition to taxes in general. Such levies were seen as taking money out of the hands of individuals who should have final control over how their hard-earned dollars are spent. This valuation is illustrated by Congressman Ron Paul's online answer to the question "What would happen to libraries in a Libertarian world? Answer: "I enjoy going to the library, donating books, checking out new ones and such. Would that be privatized? Maybe a slight library fee per year. (Ron Paul Forums, 2010)

When analyzed, the unwillingness of some of the members of the Midwest state's elected officials and/ or their staff to accept library perceptions of the value of federal library funding is consistent with critical realities of the human condition. The fundamentally important 1986 document *Research Policies for the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, a report developed by the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, examined how decisionmakers use or ignore research of any type, even to the point of embracing what might now be known now as "alternative facts" or fake facts."

Although describing the response of decisionmakers to the results of research, this Library of Congress report can be considered to be a pre-web analysis of how some people may perceive validated information offered to them, including information offered by library and information professionals.

As stressed in the Research Policies for the Social and Behavioral Sciences:

Political decisionmaking is "irrational"—or not based wholly on objective information—to the extent that political choices are based on a complex set of factors including facts, values, distributive effects and political judgments of the public good. (Library of Congress, 1986, p. 175)

and

Policymaking is a process that uses many inputs—values, advocacy or interest group pressures and scientific information—to name but a few. Often the validity of behavioral and social science information is measured against standards embodied in the consensus of prevailing social and political values. Verified, or even *non-verified*, *behavioral and social information will be used in policymaking if it coincides with these values* [emphasis added]. (Library of Congress, 1986, p. 221)

Over the years, one response to this classic Library of Congress study, more accepted by political pragmatists and less influential with change-minded political idealists, is to accept the reality that certain government and other decisionmakers, their political followers, and humans in general, will only accept "facts" that coincide with already established values and views.

It needs be emphasized that the trial and error heuristics seen above as capturing the interactions of librarians and library supporters with representatives of American political life are examples of tacit knowledge. Such knowledge may be considered to be a wisdom relying heavily on situationally-developed expertise. Utilizing expert tacit knowledge can be an effective approach when more quantitative research approaches, such as those involving statistical analysis of collected data, encounter only limited amounts and/or types of quantifiable information. A fine definition of tacit knowledge has been offered by Jonathan Benson of the University of Manchester:

Much of the knowledge we act on day to day we could not express even if called upon to do so. Take, for example, the knowledge needed for conducting many occupations. Such knowledge cannot be fully learnt simply by reading a manual, no matter how detailed, but requires participation in that occupation itself. It requires learning while doing. Although we cannot fully express it, the tacit knowledge we gain through experience is often vitally important to our understanding and ability to make decisions in the complex social systems we occupy. It is also often very important to political decision-making and to public policy. (Benson, 2019, p. 78.)

In short, an emphasis on quantification simply addresses what can be quantified. It may thereby fall short of providing adequate understandings of political and other realities in the post-fact contemporary world.

### 2 The political present-- truth as a victim

Although the visits of public, academic, and school librarians to legislative offices in the American capital of Washington continue to this day, the greater context has changed. In large part this is because political discourse in the U.S. and the larger world has become something resembling "post-truth politics" (Hannan, 214). It is a flight from rationality, due in substantial part to the effects of social media. Such a toxic mix has become so evident that Canadian researcher Jason Hannon felt compelled to conclude a recent essay on the topic with an admonition so powerful that it deserves an extended citation:

With the rise of social media, we are witnessing the birth of a new political language game, in which one of the primary moves is the speech act of trolling. In a discursive space unregulated by shared standards of truth, logic, evidence and civility – in effect, a kind of Wild West of communication – trolling functions as a nuclear option, metaphorically speaking, for public discourse that all too often breaks down over political disagreements. .... We have observed the practice of trolling migrate from anonymous comments on blogs to open comments by users with no wish to hide their identities, from citizens who troll politicians to politicians who troll them back and from lawmakers who troll each other through legislative trolling to national leaders who troll each other with the threat of a literal nuclear option (Hannon, 2018, p. 220).

Hannan's Canadian-based analysis is a useful summary of an international problem which, due to government policy, can and does vary on a national basis. Nevertheless, a more extensive examination of fundamental realities is required to understand life in a "post-truth" world.

### 3 Defining the problem

People may believe the erroneous information offered in electronic environments because humans are hard-wired to do so. As explained in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) research discussed in a recent issue of the popular journal *Scientific American*, the emerging field of "computational social science" repeatedly demonstrates "humans are not, as has long been assumed, rational" (Quattrociocchi, 2017, p. 1 or 4). The causes of such problematic human subjectivity seem to be variants of day-to-day experiences. An August 20, 2018 article in *Time*, titled "How Your Brain Tricks You into Believing Fake News" asserted "The problem is not just malicious bots or chaos-loving trolls or Macedonian teenagers pushing phony stories for profit" (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 3/9).

Instead,

Humans like to think of themselves as rational creatures, but much of the time we are guided by emotional and irrational thinking. Psychologists have shown this through the study of cognitive shortcuts known as heuristics. It's hard to imagine getting through so much as a trip to the grocery store without these helpful time-savers. "You don't and can't take the time and energy to examine and compare every brand of yogurt," says Wray Herbert, author of *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*. So, we might instead rely on what is known as the familiarity heuristic, our tendency to assume that if something is familiar, it must be good and safe. (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 4/9)

Heuristics or mental models can be convenient shortcuts for decisions derived from the largely tacit knowledge experience of solving problems of everyday life. Heuristics can and do vary by culture. Sometimes they work; sometimes they don't. In the web environment personally developed mental shortcuts appear to count more in making and reinforcing decisions than the results of scientific inquiry. As Mihailidis and Viotty stress, "we are left with a world that is hostile toward any claim of expertise and that is increasingly framed by a kind of postmodern relativism" (2017,p. 448). The force of this relativism is such that it has been perceived as contributing to the decline of democratic institutions (Bennett & Livingston 2018).

On June 25,2018, National Public Radio's podcast *HiddenBrain* featured an interview entitled *Fake News: An Origin Story* conducted by Shankar Vedantam with Professor Andie Tucher of Columbia University's journalism school. Most of the interview was devoted to the extended history of fake news in U.S. newspapers and other media, ranging from its roots in bogus stories in pre-Revolutionary colonial newspapers to examples from contemporary online social networks and their serious implications for national life. In her interview Professor Tucher even argues that the constant attack by the Trump administration on journalism and journalists has left "truth telling no place to stand" (Vedantam, 2018).

### 4 The why and the how of "fake news" and disinformation

In years past, the limited number of newspaper, journal, television, and radio communication outlets, coupled with minimal opportunities for individuals to affect matters on the public stage, clearly served the status quo. To a large extent such restrictions on available information substantiated the general public's confidence that governments were effective, journalists were reliable, nations had cohesion, and the lives of populations in the developed world were steadily improving. In the words of Bennett and Livingston, "the combination of higher trust and fewer public information sources enabled both authorities and the press to exercise more effective gatekeeping against wild or dangerous narratives from the social fringes or foreign adversaries" (2018, p. 128).

It may well be the case that this perceived cultural stability, supported by many who benefitted from the status quo but opposed by others seeking change from unequal treatment, has fallen victim to the power of social networking and other online channels. Setting aside examination of the nature and extent of Russian and other malicious influences on various European nations, as well as the 2016 American presidential election (United States, 2018), it is possible to list a number of dysfunctional factors at play in the contemporary electronic environment.

This list, it should be noted, if far from exhaustive,

- In information society, bad information can drive out good [emphasis added]" (Marshall, 2917, p. 11).
- Massive amounts of erroneous information are spread online through what might be termed the time-saving *TL;DR heuristic*; heuristic being defined as "a method of learning or solving problems that allows people to discover things themselves and learn from their own experiences" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). By using the TL;DR heuristic (Too long, didn't read) online posters seem to provide their affiliated groups with an acceptable justification for promoting unread erroneous, slanderous, and completely made-up material (Cooke, 2917, p. 211). The claim that Hilary Clinton was involved with a crime ring that involved "kidnapping, molesting and trafficking children" out of the back room of a Washington DC pizzeria (Kang 2016) seems to evidence the problematic operation of this heuristic.
- Numerous websites entice visitors (clicks) to online advertisers and thereby generate revenue by emphasizing "sensational headlines or suggestive content," regardless of the validity of the information (Burkhardt, 2017, p. 8).
- Strong online groups with "relatively shared values and categories" seek to demean other groups with differing beliefs. They will often attack their own group members who appear to stray from current core beliefs (Marshall, 2017, p. 7). This view of information fits in with the understanding that "processes of communication, information and reasoning" can be "primarily concerned with maintaining group bonding, group category boundaries, status within groups, and self-identity, rather than about conveying accurate information or finding rational solutions to problems" (Marshall, 2017, p. 2). It is a reality often little understood by library and information practitioners.
- Reasoning is ineffective for correcting erroneous judgments, particularly in the online world. "Reasoning does not lead to more accurate beliefs about an object, to better estimates of the correctness of one's answer, or to superior moral judgments. Instead, by looking only for supporting arguments, reasoning strengthens people's opinions, distorts their estimates, and allows them to get away with violations of their own moral intuitions" (Mercier and Sperber, 2011, p. 68).
- It is self-defeating to try to convince online and other believers of the errors of "fake facts" using the traditional journalistic approach of providing data to support both sides of an argument. This method is less effective than supplying a correct answer from a well-informed resource. If expected to weigh data supporting both sides of a public dispute, "citizens are likely to resist or reject arguments and evidence contradicting their opinions—a view that is consistent with a wide variety of research" (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010, p. 304).
- In the area of decision-making, repeated research has demonstrated a critical role for human perceptions and experiences (Hede, 2017, p. 84). In other words, the "subjective" can and does routinely trump the "objective" in the circumstances of life

These veracities should be kept in mind when considering the following passage from Francisco Jose Moreno's classic "The Myth of Political Rationality" in which he addresses the necessary conditions for communal stability.

Effective education is what makes what we call stable societies, that is societies in which there is general agreement on basic values and beliefs. Such agreement, obviously, can only result through proper training of society's members. Effective education is, therefore, the means used by a society to retain its cohesiveness through control of its members. Such control is propagated and perpetuated primarily through non-verbal means and its appeal is to the irrational forces that move man (sic) to seek acceptance and companionship [emphasis added]. (Moreno, 1975, 24-25)

The present, largely unregulated social networking environment has amplified a downside to enhancing communication of a wide spectrum of beliefs and values. It continually demonstrates how the carefully acquired expertise of experts can easily be abandoned for a subjective reliance on faulty heuristics or mental shortcuts. It is with this reality in mind that the remainder of this essay will address how libraries and information centers can contribute to efforts to devise solutions to the cyber "fake fact" challenge.

Two questions immediately come to mind in such a library and information center commitment to advancing "truth."

- Is it actually possible for libraries and information centers to help create a safe place for "truth telling" in a web-based world? and
- 2. If a safe place for truth telling is possible, at least in part, are libraries and information centers willing to accept the possible negative consequences generated by the effort to develop and maintain it?

### 5 Fashioning a library and information center response

At the risk of losing nuance in understanding with a developed world perspective, three meta-causes can be identified as needing to be addressed by societies in any effort to diminish the negative impacts of web-based and other producers of fake facts.

These meta-causes, which often overlap, include,

- 1. "Russian [and other] cyber activity and other active measures (covert influence activities run by the Russian intelligence services)....directed against the United States and its allies" (United States, 2018; p. viii). Transparency in elections and government is increasingly fundamental to the operation of a self-governing society. Deliberate efforts to muddle the "real" facts can render democratic decision-making untrustworthy
- 2. Popular sites developed by "apolitical disinformation entrepreneurs producing fake news to make money in the booming 'attention economy' on online media" (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, p. 133). These disinformation entrepreneurs seek to maximize visits to their sites and the resulting advertiser revenue through "sensational headlines and suggestive content" (Burkhardt, 2017, p. 8). This category can also expand to include cybercriminals who "are individuals or teams of people who use technology to commit malicious activities on digital systems or networks with the intention of stealing sensitive company information or personal data, and generating profit" (Trend Micro, 2018).
- 3. Postings by individuals and groups with perceived grievances. These can include those who believe the American Dream—or its European equivalents—has been taken away and given to others by the unfair actions of governments and cultural elites. Such people may be politically conservative, even to the point of being alt-right; they may also be categorized as operating on the grievance heuristic. Several responders to the American Conservative article "Woke' Librarians Take Their Politics To Another Level: Field Is In 'Meltdown' Mode After Trump Election" (Waters, 2017), seek to refute claims that their group is advantaged by race. To them, these assertions are disproven by day-to-day experience. The more radical factions of this component of the web world, the alt-right media groups, have been labeled as being hostile to "liberal democratic values" and promoting "ethnic nationalism and the restoration of mythical cultural traditions" (Bennett and Livingston, 2018, p. 125).

It is possible but unproductive to lump trolls of the left and right together. Analyses of the relevant literature indicate that the influence of the nonfactual claims created and/or disseminated by the alt right seems to be more influential than that of the alt left in both American and European contexts (Bennett and Livingston; 2018; Marshall 2017).

In what the American Library Association has termed "library and information studies," former library director, city manager, and *American Libraries* columnist Will Manley asserted "despite our core value of intellectual freedom, librarians are not very tolerant of listening to points of view that stray from the basic liberal agenda" (Manley, 2010). Whether or not one is in accord with Manley's claim, it does serve as a reminder that librarians and information specialists, being human, are also susceptible to embracing "fake facts" that support existing beliefs. The need to avoid the already discussed familiarity heuristic (above) defined as "our tendency to assume that if something is familiar, it must be good and safe (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 4/9) should be a priority, whatever the political and social commitments of individual library and information practitioners.

### 5.1 Is It Actually Possible for Libraries and Information Centers to Help Create A Safe Place For "Truth Telling" In A Web-Based World?"

As already examined, web-amplified human partisanship has reached a dominating position in the present day. In consequence, efforts by librarians and information specialists to enhance public acceptance of the processes necessary to identify and use truthful facts in professional and personal lives may have only limited success. Even planning for such positive actions can actually be difficult and less than effective. Group interaction on the web represents a complex system and "human attempts to understand complex systems can never be complete or entirely accurate; they always have to acknowledge some degree of uncertainty and lack" (Marshall, 2017, p. 3). Additionally, efforts to train community, school, and organizational members in the process of identifying and promoting truth may be received and supported only by those whose values and perceptions already predispose them to do so.

A more expansive support is possible for librarians and information specialists in promoting the determination and use of validated facts. Ironically, it requires a web-based era embracing of the already-discussed state of affairs involving interactions between the Midwestern state's library and information proponents and their state's Washington-based political operatives.

It is to be recalled in the scenario that began this essay that both the Midwestern state's delegation for *National Library Legislative Day* and the state's Washington political community were able to agree on the honesty of the librarian provided "facts." This was so even if they sometimes differed in their interpretations of the meaning of those facts (above). In the present-day's distracting and often erroneous "noise" of web-based communication, even maintaining and reinforcing such a relatively well-mannered state of affairs represents a necessary starting point. It would represent a positive reality where librarians and information specialists are perceived by decisionmakers and voters as honest brokers of facts even when the implications of such facts are debated. Further, acknowledging and embracing this earlier model in contemporary cyber contexts would be a powerful symbol of trust. It might even be considered a tacit endorsement by government decisionmakers of the value of the work of librarians and information specialists in training students and out-of-school adults in the process of discerning fact from fiction in the uncertain web environment.

#### 5.1.1 Modernization of Trust in Librarians and Information Specialists

At a minimum, libraries and information centers can instruct users in the techniques of separating web fact from web fiction (University of Toronto Libraries, 2018). In the complex morass of social networking even the previously rare can become common. Libraries and information centers developing, sharing, and promoting ways to educate people against falling for false facts, may find that this traditional library activity is perceived by some as unacceptable engagement in local, state, and national political processes.

Actors in challenging disinformation and misinformation are likely to vary by context. In addressing foreign cyber-attacks and international deceptions that threaten the national security and the domestic democratic processes of the United States and other developed countries, national and state governments, and for-profit social networking providers, are likely to move with some levels of nonpartisan support.

The case may be different in tackling the harm to societies caused by questionable, if legal, money-making postings by shady social networking entrepreneurs may be more difficult. Political life can involve the clash of ideas, but in the United States it runs on money. Being elected to government positions can demand substantial funding. In advanced democracies political contributions from those operating questionable cyber sites spend just as easily in political campaigns as funds earned more in accord with a society's ethical standards. Accepting such support means that obligations can be incurred, even without a formal quid pro quo arrangement, that protect disreputable internet entrepreneurs even as attempts to suppress clearly illicit web operations are given greater support.

The broad area of fake facts in the cause of cultural, societal, and personal actions is an area where libraries and information centers may have greater influence. As noted, the negative components can involve

posts and sites created by disaffected individuals and groups who believe that the American Dream—or its European equivalents—has passed them by while others, less deserving, have been more favored by governments and elites. Here it is helpful, indeed necessary, to gain greater understanding of how and why people with grievances participate from a negative standpoint in the contemporary information environment. Elements of what must be learned in such an important "broadening of perspective" have been outlined by Bennett and Livingston (2018).

Part of this broadening of perspective is to resist easy efforts to make the problem go away by fact-checking initiatives and educating citizens about the perils of fake news. *Many citizens actively seek such information in order to support identities and political activities that stem from emotional and material dislocations from the modern national and global institutional orders* [emphasis added]. What appears from the outside to be false information may actually engage deeper emotional truths for members of rising movements that willfully defy reason. The intention is often to create irreparable breaches in democratic public spheres that have traditionally been based on enlightenment values and reasoned debate. (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

In most circumstances, the challenges faced by library and information supporters in identifying and promoting honest factual communication in cyber environments will likely require substantial funding and personnel hours to address. Assistance from other players in the effort, at best, may be inadequate due to the differing priorities discussed above. Consequently, the meta-area where libraries and information centers may have greater influence, and thereby invite some level of retaliation, involve postings and entire sites created by disaffected individuals and groups.

## 5.2 "If a Safe Place for Truth Telling" Is Possible, At Least In Part, Are Libraries and Information Centers Willing to Accept The Possible Negative Consequences Generated by the Effort to Develop and Maintain It?"

Dedication to information literacy and its commitment to identifying and promoting fact is fundamental to the contemporary fields of information science and librarianship (Hirsh, 2018). In this context, the need to recognize fake news in social media has even been seen as providing "an opportunity for information professionals to highlight their role of educators working to create a more informed citizenry" (Cunningham & Rosenblatt 2018, p. 205) A particularly relevant approach to educating students within U.S. higher education in understanding the creation, identification, and use of authentic information is outlined in the 2015 Framework for Information literacy for Higher Education of the Association of College and Research Libraries (Association, 2015). Of particular value within this document are the discussions of the six critical concepts that address the "affective, attitudinal, or fundamental dimension of learning"--Authority Is Constructed and Contextual; Information Creation as a Process; Information Has Value; Research as Inquiry; Scholarship as Conversation; Searching as Strategic Exploration (Association, 2015, p. 2). These concepts and their elaboration represent first-rate professional advice.

The professional commitment to information literacy and truth determination of the American and other information and library communities, as well as the communities' development of relevant tools for advancing such goals, is clearly demonstrable. Yet it is also necessary to concede their narrow ability to effect change, at least in the U.S. context. It is fairly easy to address the errors contained in a print work which, short of being digitized and placed on the web, maintains a certain stability. It is much more difficult to locate, let alone correct, the numerous electronic activities of online trolls in multiple web environments.

Dealing with the deliberately antagonistic work of internet trolls on matters not involving weaponized cyberspace or the web of ill-gotten revenue may be an area with few allies for libraries and information centers. In the United States, federal, state and local governments, as well as the judiciary at all levels, tend to support free speech on both constitutional grounds and the long-argued approach that the best remedy for bad speech is more good speech. Similarly, also in play is the need to recognize limits imposed by the specified purpose for creating a library or information center. In the United States, public and school libraries supported by public funds can have their activities limited or encouraged by state law,

local ordinance, departmental regulation, and judicial decision. Such matters may vary by state or even by locality within a state. For example, State of Illinois library law provides that "to provide local *public institutions of general education* [emphasis added] for citizens of Illinois, library districts and libraries may be established, equipped, and maintained" (Illinois Compiled Statutes, 2018). The designation by Illinois of public libraries as "local public institutions of general education" would seem to provide ample justification for cyber education efforts. The case is likely to be different with privately supported libraries and information centers These operate on organizational rules which can vary with interests of the board of directors or the chief executive officer (CEO).

Legal and public acceptance of the truth promoting efforts of library and information personnel and supporters is likely to be present in many U.S. municipal, state, and federal legislative offices. As discussed earlier in this essay, where disagreements have taken place in the past between library supporters and those functioning in the political world, it has often been over the meanings ascribed to library-provided facts and their implications for public policy. It has not tended to be a dispute over the veracity of the facts themselves.

In the United States, federal and state constitutions and laws support the right of citizens to work for societal and cultural change on personal and group levels. Such efforts are likely to face problems when funding and personnel hours are allocated by publicly-supported libraries and information centers to work for alterations in the status quo that are not clearly within a public organization's legal authority (Crowley, 2012). Seeking advice from a public library or school system's attorney in advance of new library efforts in opposing web-based fake facts and trolling simply makes sense.

### 6 Appropriate planning

A more positive vision of cyberspace libraries, ironically, may be an effort taken in the context of declining public support for library activities. It is an unfortunate reality that external circumstances seem to have contributed to lowered appreciation of the worth of the public library. In the last ten years the public library's "perceived value and relevance to the community has declined" (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018, p. 10). Specifically, in 2008 71% of people surveyed on a United States national basis agreed to the statement "if the library were to shut down, something essential would be lost." In 2018, only 55 percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement (p.10).

In its analysis of the possible sources of this decline in support for the American public library, the report *From Awareness to Funding: Voter Perceptions and Support of Public Libraries In 2018* described a contemporary situation where

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube had opened to the public just a year before the original research was conducted; the introduction of the first iPhone soon followed. Today, smartphones and social media are used by millions around the world. They have amassed vast shares of the attention economy and created tidal shifts in how people communicate and access information. (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018, p. 26)

In its discussion of what could be done to reverse the decline in the public estimation of the value of the library, the OCLC and American Library Association report quoted Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel who once said, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. It's an opportunity to do things you thought you couldn't do before." Although the report advised "we as a library community should not wait for a crisis to take action we might believe is not possible" (p. 28), it may be the case that the crisis is already here. The contemporary, indeed nearly overwhelming, flood of disinformation, "fake news," and "alternative facts" is a looming calamity where substantial library and information efforts to mitigate its impact may become both feasible and supported.

### 7 What is possible?

Knowing what is possible in addressing the universe of "false facts' requires an understanding of the various contexts involved. Good "teaching public libraries" ought to have online, paper, and cyber collections that reflect the multiplicity of positions that might be found on an issue of community concern. However, in their roles as teachers, instructors, facilitators, or guides, public librarians have the additional duty of identifying which solutions to public issues seem to be most in accord with the facts. In this area, if would only make sense for public and other librarians to engage with recognized community leaders and experts in their efforts to understand community needs (Lankes 2018). In the process, ways could be devised to help make cyberspace more educationally friendly. To this end, it would not be unreasonable to envision U.S. public and other libraries employing journalists and fact checkers whose expertise would be valuable in identifying and linking to sources of "true fact" state, national, and international sites even as they manage similar sites dealing with local or regional issues. Electronic "fact" publications and workshops would also be an ongoing public library reality. Academic libraries might find it advantageous to link up with campus journalism and/or communications schools. School libraries, due to the historic U.S. sensitivity regarding the curriculum, might find such efforts to be a greater challenge. However, cooperating with local public libraries in the a "true facts" effort might be a fallback option.

Here, the attentive reader might wonder if the author is arguing for a stronger educational function for public and other libraries as a means of helping to stabilize contemporary American and other developed societies. Such an approach would seemingly echo the controlling and stabilization use of the power of education as discussed above in Francisco Jose Moreno's "The Myth of Political Rationality" (1975, pp. 24-25). It is possible that any library and information effort to establish and teach one or more standard methods for discerning truth runs the remote theoretical risk of contributing to making such education "the means used by a society to retain its cohesiveness through control of its members" (Moreno, 1975, 24-25). However, it is worth noting the influence of academic, public and school librarian-educators on the national level may be disappointedly minimal. In comparison, one only need consider the reactions of for-profit publishers to protests about books in an environment that can and has been referred to as a "hair-trigger, hyperreactive social media landscape, where a tweet can set off a cascade of outrage and prompt calls for a book's cancellation" (Alter, 2017). Admittedly, the successful protests discussed in "Books News: In an Era of Online Outrage, Do Sensitivity Readers Result in Better books, or Censorship?" do not reflect the action of the alt-right. It may even be asserted that they may involve a bit of the alt-left.

Thoughtful librarians may debate the plusses and minuses of claim that "the role that readers play in shaping children's books has become a flash point in a fractious debate about diversity, cultural appropriation and representation, with some arguing that the reliance on sensitivity readers amounts to censorship" (Alter, 2017). Consumer boycotts of various products have been a decades-old form of protest in free enterprise national and local economies. Still, the road to be travelled by libraries and information specialists in calling out false facts does have its pitfalls and suitable precautions will need to be taken

Before embarking on more vigorous efforts to support "true fact" in cyber worlds, actions that some might label as being beyond the purposes for which a library or information center was created, it behooves managers to secure support from their higher authorities. This caution applies whether such higher authorities be library or school boards of trustees, university presidents, or corporate CEOs. Advice from the organization's attorney would also be appropriate. In the United States, local public library and university governing boards, in particular, have substantial authority under state and federal law to adopt or ignore standards advocated by professional library and information associations. Nevertheless, many library managers have found out that hiring authorities can be surprisingly supportive of librarian activism in a professionally supported cause. The key tends to be alerting such authorities in advance of possible problems.

In an e-universe infected with revenge-seeking trolls, it is possible that elevating the "truth supporting" or "fact correcting" presence of a library or information center will result in individuals or groups feeling the need to respond. This might consist of launching cyber-attacks on the institution and its personnel or, more suitably, conducting rational online arguments with opponents over the authorizing basis of the library

or information center's pro truth activities. In something approaching worst-case scenarios, objectors to library or information center analyses of their "facts" might seek to defeat sitting members of an elected library or school board via a web-based protest campaign. It is possible that either the alt-right or alt-left may seek to defeat a long-needed library or school levy in response to perceived grievances. Restated, in a complex cyberworld any library and information action—or lack of action—might be a proximate cause of an online attack by those who feel aggrieved.

### 8 Next steps

In addressing the matter of "fake facts" it is important to restate the reality that influence in the web milieu in U.S. and other contexts often has relatively little to do with "facts." Nonetheless, there does exist a continuing professional and philosophical commitment by U.S. librarians and information specialists to advancing a wide spectrum of information literacy as both a good in itself and as a means to reinforce the primacy of fact in online environments and the numerous worlds of practice (Hirsh 2018). As previously noted, this commitment will doubtless include a growing number and variety of onsite and online workshops, tutorials, and yet to be developed approaches. Almost all nations censor the internet to some degree and each government determines what it does not want its populace to view (Why 2019). It is therefore more likely that formal library information literacy training will be more useful in nations with relatively open web communication.

Given human nature and the time constraints of contemporary life in developed nations, it is unlikely that instruction emphasizing a detailed approach for the analysis of web postings is likely to be widely adopted. This is particularly so in nations such as the United States, where law and/or culture limit the restrictions that can be placed on "speech" conveyed through social media. While detailed quantitative rules may be conveyed in such contexts through library-facilitated instruction, it is more likely that tacit knowledge heuristics developed by expert library and information searchers will be remembered and used by those instructed in their use. As previously noted, tacit knowledge developed heuristics simply save time and deliver evaluations "good enough" for day-to-day use.

Actions by a library or information center involving the use of public funds are inherently political. That reality brings up an issue that might hinder library efforts to challenge cyber errors and inaccuracies. The library and information community is filled with first-rate minds in leadership positions. However, in Professor Tucher's world where "truth telling [has] no place to stand" (Vedantam, 2018), how many such luminaries have spent the time necessary to become expert in the political processes increasingly necessary, in a spectrum of national contexts, to defend library and information center activities? How many can develop a political heuristic and larger tacit knowledge to be sufficiently effective in developing alliances in the admittedly difficult effort to give truth a "place to stand," regardless of the nation or context in which they are employed?

During the middle of the last century Lyndon B. Johnson, shortly after being sworn in as U.S. President John F. Kennedy's vice president, talked to his mentor Speaker of the federal House of Representatives Sam Rayburn about all the brilliant men (sic) that President Kennedy had appointed to his cabinet. In response, Rayburn said "You may be right, and they may be every bit as intelligent as you say. But I'd feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once." (Rich, 2008, p. 4/5). Both in Johnson's time and the present day, a number of stereotypes would be broken if it could be revealed that librarians who met regularly with political operatives were more effective influencers in the political process to defend factual accuracy than certain presidential cabinet luminaries.

The political challenges to be faced once libraries and information centers decide to engage in cyberspace exchanges with those seen as purveyors of falsehoods ought not to be underestimated. This is particularly so if they choose to approach the matter in a public "naming and shaming" mode. To publicly correct malefactors might be commendable. Yet, politically-astute library and information leaders would know in advance that even criminal convictions would have little success in changing the contents and use of the web. It simply remains the case that too many otherwise commendable people (1) are most receptive

to information that supports what they already believe and (2) prefer guidance from heuristics reflecting their own seat-of-the-pants experience rather than documented, if time-consuming, methods of securing reliable information

In an ideal world, all library and information personnel would have extensive political and communications experience and users would all judge information via the journalistic truism that "if your mother says she loves you check it out." Given that most practitioners lack political experience and/or a journalism education, library and information advocates are likely to need a spectrum of allies with such expertise in any attempt to advance cyber factual credibility and intellectual authenticity. National laws and service contexts inevitably vary. Consequently, it is going to take a number of experiments to determine if it is even possible in certain nations to generate a broader awareness of the reality and worth of fact, including web verified fact, over more fallible human perceptions.

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