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Fake News
in the Classroom

Re-examining Our Approaches to Information Literacy

by Emma Black

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What's the Deal With Fake News?

What began as a buzzword during the 2016 American election has grown into something verging on a cultural phenomenon. Many of the fears, frustrations, and failings of communicating information in the 21st century were crystallized in the words "fake news." Collins Dictionary chose *fake news* as its word of the year for 2017, defining it as "[f]alse, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news" (1). This meaning often gets muddled with other definitions or related concepts such as misinformation, yellow journalism, sensationalism, hoaxes, the post-truth era, fabricated news, and news satire. Elements of each are wrapped up in how we frame the problem of fake news.

Although the popularity of the term can be traced back to President Trump (it was his sixth-most tweeted phrase during his first 100 days in office) (2), he was not the first to use it. While he often conflates fake news with negative press or any criticism directed at his office or supporters, his 'Fake News Awards' and frequent use of the term have kept the popularity of the phrase current. News stories are more frequently being disregarded, especially when they challenge the views of the reader. The sharing of news on social media is also muddying the waters, as the context and authority of stories are more difficult to determine (3). Algorithms on sites such as Facebook create *filter bubbles* that draw our attention to news stories that appeal to us while suppressing those that may not (4).

What do fake news have to do with our students and classrooms? Behind the seemingly novel phenomenon of fake news, a larger issue has been identified for a number of years. Students are dealing with a problem that is larger and older than the recent American election. The ability to find, evaluate, critique, and credit information—also known as *information literacy*—can be used not only to identify which Facebook stories might be less accurate than they claim to be, but also to invest in a robust research process. These skills seem to be lacking in many students entering higher education. In this article, I will consider the following questions: Who are our students; what are their information needs; what is information literacy; and how can we better address it in our own pedagogy?

Who are Our Students?

Consider how you once researched: Where did you go to find reference sources? How long did you have to spend in front of a library card catalogue? Where did you access news stories and how did you know to trust them? Sources of information were often very distinct in format. Assessing the origin of information seemed more straightforward, as well as determining the authority of an author, the type of resource, and the context of the information. Today, the move from print to electronic media means that different information sources are bundled together and the context surrounding each source gets lost. And this is the environment in which our students are trying to research.

Much has been said about students today and their use of technology and social media in the classroom. They are a unique generation, having grown up in a constantly wired environment: "Baby Boomers grew up as television expanded dramatically …. Generation X grew up as the computer revolution was taking hold, and Millennials came of age during the internet explosion" (5). Students born after 1997 are now being referred to as Post-Millennials. They are identified as being too young to have understood 9/11 (or were born after the event), whereas Millennials were born between 1981-1996 and have experienced the transition from offline to online worlds (5). Not only have Post-Millennials grown up in an *always on* technology environment; they see content as "ever-changing, individualized and personal" (6). Information is now very often dynamic, not static. No longer one-directional, it exists in an instantly collaborative environment. While it is assumed that these students are tech-savvy and have a great understanding of where to find information, could it be that the more information is available, the less skilled students are at evaluating sources?

The Stanford History Education Group released a study in 2016 entitled "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning" (7). In the study, students from middle schools, high schools, and colleges across twelve US states were tested on their ability to judge the credibility of online information. From the 7,804 responses that were analyzed, it was found that as many as 80% of students could not identify the difference between an advertisement and a news story; distinguish between real and fake news stories; identify bias in a tweet; or determine the credibility of a website (7). My University of Lethbridge colleagues Romany Craig and Tara Wiebe, when teaching a class on evaluating information, also observed that many students failed to think critically about the purpose of an article and the authority of the author.

A UK study from 2011 concluded that while students are confident users of the internet, they are not necessarily *competent* users (8). Less than one in ten students, while using information online, asked who made the website and why (p.165). In their cross-generational study of information overload, Benselin and Ragsdell (9) observed that the younger generation expressed more concern with the large quantity of information and displayed "the most trust issues regarding quality of information" (p.294). Instant and unlimited access, with little time to absorb or reflect on the information, leads to a feeling of information overload (9).

The result of this combination of information overload and technological change is that students do not fully understand the research process, and, although they are comfortable with social media, often lack media literacy skills. Badke (10) comments that this lack of information literacy translates into a poor research process:

> Many of our students don't know how to do research. They are going through undergraduate and even graduate studies as outsiders looking in, rarely really being able to participate in the discourse and discovery that their professors find so familiar. These same students do not even understand the expectations found in a standard research assignment and spend most of their 'researching' time simply trying to follow professorial instructions while failing to grasp the methodology and never engaging with the subject matter. (10: p.191)

He writes further, "[t]hese students fail to appreciate the diversity of information sources available to them and lack the ability to evaluate these sources for quality and relevance" (10). One solution proposed, though neither perfect nor complete by any means, is to refocus our attention on information literacy.

What is Information Literacy?

Information literacy considers whether users are able to find appropriate information, evaluate it, access it, and use it. Sales and Pinto (11) describe information literacy as giving "learners the ability to confront contents critically, to become more self-sufficient, and to take more control over their own learning process" (p.xxii).

Further points from Sales and Pinto expand on the idea of what an information-literate learner looks like:

• Able to determine the extent of information needed;

• Access the required information effectively and efficiently;

- Evaluate information and its sources critically;

- Incorporate selected information into their knowledge base;

- Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose;

- Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information;

- Access and use information both ethically and legally.

> *Information literacy considers whether users are able to find appropriate information, evaluate it, access it, and use it.*

A literate information seeker will not simply pick the first result from a Google search that has enough words in the title to fit a research question. Instead, the searcher will ask if the information is current, relevant, authoritative, accurate, and serves the research purpose.

However, handing out a checklist or showing a guide on evaluating information at the beginning of a semester can have little impact on students' research process. Johannessen (12) found that students learn more about media and information literacy when it is closely connected to and integrated with disciplinary content and assignments (p.93). Furthermore, he suggests that this type of instruction does not have to be initiated by the library, but rather should involve the broader university community.

Questions to Ask

While many research articles in librarianship recognize that librarians are poised to play a large role in teaching students information literacy skills, others have expressed reservations, saying that there is a need to gain the support of instructors. Here at the University of Lethbridge, we liaison librarians fulfill a variety of roles. In terms of instruction, we may only see students once a semester, for perhaps no longer than half an hour, or miss groups of students altogether. While librarians are here to equip and engage, the onus of instruction falls primarily on those teaching the classes. I do not expect that this will necessarily involve discussing fake news and social media's influence on our information environments (though these are interesting conversations to have); rather, students should have the chance to engage in scholarly literature and research in different ways. Critical thinking is a pillar of our liberal education commitment, and having students reflect on materials they gather and what sources they use is invaluable. Sullivan (13) proposes that research into misinformation should move beyond the field of librarianship and engage with other disciplines. We each view this issue from different frameworks, backgrounds, and experiences.

How does information literacy fit into your own pedagogy? Has the information overload that students are faced with come into play in your assignments or teaching practices? As noted above, a move away from assumptions regarding the digital literacy of our students is necessary in order to re-engage students in this type of critical thinking. Crocco and co-authors (14) point to the need to move beyond labelling evidence as *good* or *bad*; rather, we need to help students recognize biases and evaluate evidence based on context, authority, and purpose. However, limiting our information literacy instruction to one class or assignment will not be as effective as a strategically scaffolding information literacy into our curricula. As Najmabadi (15) writes, "while a professor or librarian may initiate information-literacy efforts, the work must be diffused throughout the curriculum so students can build up skills over time." While visiting classes, I have seen students' eyes glaze over when I mention the library or research; yet, they consider information more relevant when it relates not only to a one-off assignment but their whole class or program.

Though this is a complex issue that will not be solved overnight, one positive point is that we have students who care about being connected, are flexible and adaptable, and are already skeptical of the accuracy of information online. Getting them to ask the right questions can be our next step. In this evolving field, I look forward to new developments in the ways our community grapples with the challenges and opportunities of information literacy.

Ideas to get you started in tackling fake news in your classroom.

Contact your liaison librarian for more information.

How to spot fake news: https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174

U of L Evaluating Sources Libguide: http://libguides.uleth.ca/evaluatingsources/home

The CRAAP test graphic: http://guides.library.utoronto.ca/utmlacadfakenews/evaluate

D'Angelo B, Jamieson S, Maid B, Walker JR (eds.) *Information literacy: Research and collaboration across disciplines.* Colorado: University Press of Colorado; 2016. http://darius.uleth.ca/record=b2604686~S1

Ingvaldsen S, Oberg D (eds.) *Media and information literacy in higher education: Educating the educators.* New York: Chandos Publishing; 2017. http://darius.uleth.ca/record=b2604691~S1