Fighting Fake News: Because We All Deserve the Truth

In past decades, a main role—perhaps the main role—of librarians and other information professionals has been providing people with access to information. With information access becoming increasingly easy via technology at home, at school, and at the public library, the role of teaching people of all ages how to evaluate information quality and authenticity is now of equal or even more importance than providing access. However, the recent surge of people participating in social media has led to unvetted sources and fake news on the Internet appearing in unprecedented quantities. The proliferation of fake news is a serious issue that affects teens at both the individual level and at the broader societal level, impacting social, political, economic, and other local, national, and international developments. Based on a 2016 study about young people’s ability to assess messages and bias in information on the Internet, the Stanford History Education Group concluded that “democracy [can be] threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.”

Libraries Transform (http://www.ilovelibraries.org/librariestransform/), an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA), has made information literacy skills and fighting fake news a priority for the future of library services, and young adult (YA) librarians must answer this call as well. Promoting media literacy is key to teaching teens how to differentiate between fake news and legitimate news on a daily basis. In the longer term, promoting media literacy is key to combating the spread of misinformation and fake news in society. By helping teens attain media literacy skills and become conscientious consumers of news, YA librarians can reduce the circulation of fake news stories.

Simply encouraging teens not to read and share fake news on social media can go a long way toward slowing down the circulation of misinformation. Being well informed of current events can also help teens to identify fake news. The first step toward achieving these goals is to educate teens and arm them with media literacy skills, or skills that enable users to “access, analyze, evaluate…and participate” with information online (Media literacy: A definition, 2017).

Fake News and Media Literacy

Today’s teens have access to news and related information via numerous mediums, such as television, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, etc. As the newest of these mediums, the Internet has become an increasingly alluring and accessible information resource. According to recent studies by the Pew Research Center, 62 percent of adults get their news via social media (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016) and 61 percent of millennials say they rely more heavily on Facebook for their political news than any other source (Gottfried and Barthel, 2015). However, teens—and adults as well—often have difficulty understanding whether or not to trust the information they find online. Sole reliance on social media as a news source presents a variety of problems including exposure to fake news via unreliable news sources and a propensity to consume biased or “filtered” information.

Internet users are vulnerable to being caught in a vicious cycle of fake news and misinformation due to how algorithmic filters are used by Google and Facebook to dictate the information
that users see first in their searches and news feeds (Pariser, 2011). As a “filter bubble” develops around Internet users, they gain a propensity to develop biased perspectives with little understanding for the opposition on controversial topics.

Since the majority of U.S. teens rely heavily on social media to receive news and information about current events, librarians should encourage them to get outside their limited news “bubbles.” This means striving to help teens “cultivate mindful habits” of information consumption and in doing so instilling life-long learning habits and a desire for civic action (Jolly, 2014).

One reason why users of all ages might believe fake news is the natural tendency to “believe information that appeals to [one’s] emotions or personal beliefs” (Cooke, 2017). Fake news creators can be highly skilled in writing stories that will appeal to personal emotions and beliefs, starting with a grain of truth and building up fake stories that reinforce their suspicions, worries, or desires.

Recognizing how emotions can play a part in influencing and/or shaping public opinion over unbiased facts is critical for teens living in what some are calling a “post-truth” society. Like fake news, the concept of post-truth has existed for some time; however, the use of the phrase increased by 2,000 percent in 2016 and led to the Oxford Dictionaries declaring it the word of the year (“Post-truth,” 2016). Recognizing that the manipulation of emotions is becoming an integral part of politics and reporting is a crucial step toward being able to create an intellectual separation between facts and emotions when consuming information. It is important to remain vigilant in combating fake news, as it is possible for people to consume false information and then take inappropriate actions (Davis, 2015).

The Recent Rise of Fake News
Prior to the advent of social media and the Internet, “ordinary people once relied on publishers, editors, and subject matter experts to vet the information they consumed” (Wineburg and McGrew, 2016). However, social media and the unregulated Internet have made it possible to easily share “misinformation with a click” (ALA Public Programs Office, 2017). The fake news issue received a great deal of press after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, with researchers, experts, reporters, and other individuals questioning how the surge in fake news might have influenced the election results. In the wake of the election, we now have the opportunity to look at the spread, motivation, and influence of fake news with teens in a context to which they can directly relate.

Why has there been such a surge in false information online? Often the motivation behind circulating fake news is purely profit. If people click on fake news headlines, fake news writers can earn advertising money for each click. Individual creators of fake news stories can make thousands of dollars per month from advertising revenue (Ohlheiser, 2016). This means that fake news writers, and even “real” news writers, are heavily motivated to create the most sensational headlines they can, and in most cases they can create fake news with impunity—there is no oversight agency to prevent them from doing it.

As a result, many users—adults as well as young people—have trouble understanding where the information they find online comes from and knowing which information sources to trust and which not to trust. A largescale Stanford University study found widespread confusion among middle school, high school, and college students when it came to assessing online information. Students in the study had difficulty differentiating between news content and advertising content, and most lacked an understanding of how biased perspectives affect news and other information messages. The Stanford study found that: “(W)hen it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, [students] are easily duped” (Wineburg and McGrew, 2016, p. 4). The researchers concluded that “Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak” (Wineburg and McGrew, 2016, p. 4).

Fake News and Libraries
As libraries continue to provide greater access to the Internet and to technology for teens and young adults, it is critical that they also begin taking a more active role in the perpetuation of digital and media literacy competencies (Hobbs, 2011, p. 15). It is becoming increasingly possible for fake news to spread quickly without any system of checks and balances. Many teens and adults are encountering misinformation and fake news on a daily basis via social media and the Internet without being aware that the information they find is misleading or wrong. Librarians can teach young people to assess and vet the information they encounter, enabling them to play the information vetting role once played by publishers, editors, and experts.

YA librarians are well positioned to help teens develop healthy practices for consuming news and other information online. Providing guidelines for identifying fake news and evaluating the overall authenticity of online news resources is a form of media literacy education that is appropriate for both public and school libraries. YA librarians can also teach teens to consume a healthy news diet including information from multiple media outlets, each offering different perspectives on the news. The end goal of such services is to cultivate a generation of conscientious news consumers who are able to navigate a post-truth society by remaining well informed about the world while also being effective and critical users of library resources.
Conclusion
In accordance with the 2016 ALA State of America’s Libraries (“State of America’s libraries,” 2016), librarians and other information professionals are moving beyond a focus on providing access to resources toward providing more interactive information services and information education. When people ask, “Why do we need libraries and librarians now that everything is online?” a good answer to this question is that librarians can play the role of information educator, not just providing access to information but helping to empower users by teaching them to understand which information to trust.

All this is to say that access to the Internet means little if someone is unable to discern between fact and conspiracy theory (Alvarez, 2016, p. 24). Thus, fake news is an information literacy issue and one that should be of primary concern to YA librarians. The programming and service ideas we offer here can help you to teach teens how to become more information literate and to avoid falling prey to fake news—because we all deserve to know the truth about our world and what is happening around us.

Where to Find Resources for Teaching Teens about a Healthy News Diet
Professional information services and news organizations, such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the ALA, YALSA, and National Public Radio (NPR), have begun to provide simple guides to assist consumers in recognizing and debunking fake news and other misleading information they encounter online. Librarians can post guidelines in technology centers or distribute composites guides to teens as a form of passive programming. They can also create hands-on educational programming to teach teens how to use the guides. The sidebar to this article lists several more specific passive and active programming ideas as well as a selection of resources to help build and implement these ideas in the library.

Regardless of the format of educational delivery, it is important for librarians and other educators to teach teens how to distinguish between types of fake news, as not all fake news is pernicious in nature. For example, there can at times be a fine line between satire and fake news, but “fake news has the intention of disseminating false information, not for comedy, but for consumption” (Alvarez, 2016, p. 24). Satire serves the purpose of acting as a critique to talk about current events, but it cannot be effective if consumers are unaware and share the satirical pieces in a literal sense (Davis, 2016).

Activities and Programs for Teaching Teens about Fake News
Teens themselves can be the best advocates against fake news among their peers. YA librarians can encourage teens to not share a story if they are not sure it comes from a reliable source as a good first step toward combating the fake news crisis.

The following list includes ideas for moving beyond this simple first step toward creating active and passive library programs intended to teach teens how to identify fake news and how to become healthy, critical news consumers and evaluators.

Active programming idea #1: Fake news is not new. The concept of fake news can be scary, but it’s important to realize that it’s not a new phenomenon. Share the history of fake news with teens and allow them to engage with it through a variety of mediums (i.e., primary resources such as pamphlets from the French Revolution criticizing Marie Antoinette along with a letter written by her or newspaper articles from the New York Journal and the New York World in the 1890s elaborating the Cuban revolution from Spain).

Active programming idea #2: Fake news today. Look at current fake news and discuss how and why it is circulating through mainstream social media. At the end of 2016, BuzzFeed compiled a list of “Biggest Fake News Hits on Facebook” (Silverman, 2016) (https://goo.gl/MFlpTX). Examine this list with teens and see if they have encountered any of these stories or other fake news stories. Ask them how they came across the story (i.e., Did they see it promoted in their news feed or was it shared by a friend or family member?) and ask them to share stories of how it changed their thinking or otherwise impacted them.

Active programming idea #3: Analyze the impact of social media. Look at how information is shared differently on Facebook, Twitter, and SnapChat and ask teens to analyze which platform they find the most effective for sharing information. Consider if there are certain circumstances in which information is more successfully shared via social media than other mediums. Also ask if there are limits to the type of information that can be shared on social media.

Active programming idea #4: Learn the difference between satire, propaganda, and opinion. Teach teens to identify the motivation for a news story and how it impacts the reliability of the story. Guided analysis of satirical websites, such as The Onion, Cracked, and ClickHole, can teach teens to recognize satirical content and to understand the intent of satirical news creators, as opposed to the intent of fake news sources.

Passive programming idea #1: Share experiences with fake news. Create an interactive area in your tech center for teens to share personal experiences with fake news that they have encountered. Encourage them to share how they identified the news as fake. Leaving stories posted in a shared space (handwritten on slips of paper pinned on a bulletin board, etc.) can serve as a positive example of how to deal with the situation.
board, posted to an online bulletin board, pictures drawn on paper and hung on a mobile from the ceiling, etc.) can be a great way to help create awareness of fake news and to help prevent others from falling prey to the same stories.

Passive programming idea #2: Identifying fake news. Post guides in the tech area to help teens identify visual cues that can indicate fake news online. More in-depth guides can be created for library patrons to take home that include the visual cue guidelines as well as analytical probes.

Passive programming idea #3: Utilizing fact-checking sources. Provide teens with handouts containing information about different fact-checking resources both online and at the library. Several resources are suggested following. For a more active programming approach, you can create short, hands-on sessions on how to use these resources effectively. It can also be helpful to make these resources accessible from your library’s home page.

Passive programming idea #4: Reading from diverse news sources. Many people don’t realize that the news they consume online as a whole is inherently biased due to the “filter bubble” effect. Encourage teens to seek news from sources outside social media by posting lists of more reliable news sources to meet information needs ranging from politics to pop culture. In addition to making a concentrated effort to seek out a variety of news sources, encourage teens to utilize apps and other technology tools to expand their news source monitoring by posting fliers around the library, each featuring a different news source and explaining its strengths and weaknesses.

Selected Recommended Resources

Identifying Fake News


Online Resources for Fact-checking

Associated Press Fact Check
The Associated Press is a nonprofit independent news organization dedicated to covering news stories from around the world. AP Fact Check is an online resource provided by the Associated Press that offers additional resources for popular news. https://www.apnews.com/tag/APFactCheck

American Press Institute
The American Press Institute is a nonprofit educational organization that conducts research and training, and creates tools for journalists with the intent to promote reliable news media in a digital age. They provide fact-checking resources on a wide range of resources from politics to public interest. https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/training-tools/fact-checking-resource/

Detector de Mentiras (Lie Detector)
Detector de Mentiras is the first U.S.-based Spanish-language fact-checking project. It is a part of Univision, a commercial media company focused on Spanish-speaking audiences. Audiences are able to suggest fact-checking topics. http://www.univision.com/noticias/detector-de-mentiras

FactCheck.org
FactCheck.org is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that strives to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. They analyze the accuracy of what is being said in the news and media by U.S. politicians and affiliates. http://www.factcheck.org/

The end goal of such services is to cultivate a generation of conscientious news consumers who are able to navigate a post-truth society by remaining well informed about the world while also being effective and critical users of library resources.
**Guidelines for Authors**

*Young Adult Library Services* is the official publication of the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association. *Young Adult Library Services* is a vehicle for continuing education of librarians working with young adults (ages twelve through eighteen) that showcases current research and practice relating to teen services and spotlights significant activities and programs of the division.

For submission and author guidelines, please visit [http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/yals/submissions/](http://yalsa.ala.org/blog/yals/submissions/).

**Index to Advertisers**

- Symposium ................................................................. Cover 2
- Top Reads Publication .............................................. 12
- Self-paced eLearning Bundles ................................. 16
- Baen Book ................................................................. 25
- Putting Teens First in Library Services ......................... 30
- Tom Phillips ............................................................... Cover 3
- Disney-Hyperion Books ............................................ Cover 4