Visual Literacy, News Literacy, and the Fight Against Misinformation

Dana Statton Thompson

Murray State University, Murray, KY

Abstract:

This column explores the ways in which the new generation of librarians can position themselves at the front lines of the misinformation and "fake news" crisis by incorporating visual literacy and news literacy into information literacy lessons.

Author Bio:

Dana Statton Thompson joined Murray State University as a Research and Instruction librarian in 2016. Her research interests include visual literacy and news literacy, student comprehension and evaluation, and assessment of library instruction.

Keywords: *critical evaluation, visual literacy, news literacy, misinformation, "fake news"*

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Journal of New Librarianship, *3* (2018) pp. 381-386 10.21173/newlibs/5/22

The internet is perhaps the greatest technological breakthrough since the Industrial Revolution. Although the internet is no longer a new phenomenon, unprecedented challenges continue to arise in the form of rampant misinformation and the inescapable and slippery defined "fake news," most notoriously influencing the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The internet has become an inescapable part of our lives. This has consequences; perhaps none so dire as the need to evaluate the massive amount of information available to us, which is increasingly becoming easier to access with very little effort.

In this climate, it is of paramount importance to ask whether our users, and especially those who are students, have the right skills and tools to evaluate this barrage of information, much of which is tucked into their "news" feeds. As users consume information, they are making decisions on what to read, share, and believe. Without evaluative skills, confirmation bias and the echo chamber effect become weapons for the purveyors of false, deliberately misleading information intended to influence public opinion or obscure facts.

In the past, librarians knew what their duties entailed: readers' advisory, collection development, bibliographic instruction, and information literacy instruction. It would be overly dismissive to argue that past efforts in teaching information literacy have failed, but new tactics are necessary. For the new generation of librarians, a more proactive approach toward information literacy is needed. Within the realm of information literacy, librarians must understand and teach visual literacy and news literacy skills. This is necessary, because today's information onslaught is characterized by its highly visual content (e.g. photographs, videos, gifs, memes, infographics, etc.) as well as its packaging by mainstream news outlets, many of which have forsaken any semblance of objectivity and have instead turned to "talking heads" and opinion pieces in order to boost ratings.

Librarians must position themselves at the front lines of this battle, combating disinformation, misinformation, hoaxes, and propaganda.

The new generation of librarians is complex. Most, if not all, grew up with a computer and access to the internet, knew someone who did, or had access through their school or local library. Despite this familiarity, many of these librarians do not blindly trust the technology at their fingertips like many college students do today. Librarians recognize that search engines like Google, Bing, and Yahoo are not the end-all, be-all, and one-stop-shop for finding information that is accurate, current, and verified. The question becomes "how do we impart that same knowledge to our users and students?"

Teaching library users and students to evaluate the visual information and news stories they find online is one solution. According to the Pew Research Center, roughly nine-in-ten (93%) adults get their news online. Two-thirds (67%) of Americans reported that they get at least some of their news on social media, with two-in-ten doing so frequently (Pew Research Center, August 2017). For those Americans 50 or under, 78% get their news from social media sites, as do 55% of those who are older than 50. Social media sites like Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat all experienced a significant increase of users who get news on their sites (an average of 12.6 percentage points) while sites like Reddit, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp reported a more modest change (an average of 3.2 percentage points). Out of the 66% of adults who use Facebook, 45% reported getting news on the site. For the younger population (aged 18-29), 25% of Facebook's users, 28% of Twitter's users, 36% of YouTube's users, 51% of Instagram's users, and a whopping 82% of Snapchat's users get their news from these social media sites.

An interesting aspect of these statistics is that two of the sites experiencing significant increases (YouTube and Snapchat) are almost exclusively visual in nature; visual information on the internet and use in social media seems to be only increasing. For example, more than 1 billion YouTube users watch an average of 1 billion hours of video content during a single day (YouTube, 2017), and it is predicted that consumers will take 1.2 trillion digital photographs in the year 2017 alone (Cakebread, 2017). Kane and Pear (2016) state that "Many of the successful recent entrants into the social media space, such as Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, Vine, Periscope, and Meerkat, emphasize visual media. Platforms that did not originate as chiefly visual—Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter—are transitioning focus to emphasize the prominence and importance of visual content" (paragraph 3). It is undeniable, then, that social media sites either already have, or are in the process of, embracing visual content at an increasing pace.

Since the use of visuals, in tandem with the consumption of news on social media, is becoming more and more prominent, it is vital that the new generation of librarians incorporate the evaluation of these two types of content into their information literacy lessons. This can be done by starting with evaluative criteria for those specific types of information, moving past the CRAAP (Currency, Relevancy, Accuracy, Authority, and Purpose) test, and deliberately discussing visual information and news stories with users and students.

Although the CRAAP test is a well-used and much-cited method for evaluating information online, there are better ways to evaluate news stories. Instead of encouraging students to ask questions that dive deep into a specific news piece or check off a series of boxes, *a la* the CRAAP test, librarians should instead encourage users and students to evaluate the information laterally to fight against falling for misinformation (Caulfield, 2017).

What does it mean to "evaluate laterally"? The idea is to open additional tabs to search for information about, and contained in, the original news story. As an example, users and students should research to see if other news outlets are reporting on a given story. If so, how do those reports differ? Are reputable news sources reporting on the story? This question facilitates another: "How does one determine what a 'reputable source' is?" which is a great opportunity to teach students about potential media bias and journalistic integrity. Directing students to resources like MediaBiasFactCheck.com, or doing an activity where you "pin the source of the spectrum" (Gervasio, 2017), provide excellent starting points. Additionally, users and students should always read the author's biographic information or, if there is none included, do a search to find out more information about the author, such as searching for the author's affiliations and credentials or even previous writings on the topic. This additional information provides context about the author and can uncover potential bias or conflicts of interest. It is also useful to check the validity of a story through fact-checking websites (e.g. Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, or PolitiFact.com) to see if the story has already been debunked.

Many news stories are now accompanied by visuals, which also need to be evaluated as pieces of information. For visuals that are incorporated into news stories, tools like reverse image searching can help identify the original source of photographs, memes, and profile pictures. Two of the best resources for this are Google Reverse Image Search (https://reverse.photos) and TinEye Reverse Image Search (https://www.tineye.com). These tools can indicate where the image appears on the web while directing users to similar images.

Finding the original image is the first step. Even more importantly, users need to understand what they are viewing. This is explained by standards Three and Four of the *Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*. Standard Three

states: “The visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media” (ACRL, 2011). This involves identifying information relevant to an image’s meaning, including captions, metadata, or any accompanying text and situating an image in its cultural, social, and historical context. By identifying relevant information and understanding the context of an image, users begin to understand the image as a whole. Standard Four states: “The visually literate student evaluates images and their sources” (ACRL, 2011). Specifically, this would move from identifying to evaluating. This process includes evaluating the effectiveness and reliability of an image as a visual form of communication, evaluating the aesthetic characteristics of an image as well as the textual information, and making judgments about the reliability and accuracy of the images.

By incorporating news literacy and visual literacy into information literacy lessons, and by guiding students through specific tasks in order to evaluate each, the new generation of librarians can position themselves at the front lines of the battle against misinformation. Integrating conversations about news stories and images will only reinforce student’s existing evaluative and critical thinking skills, further strengthening their ability to fight “fake news” and misinformation.

References

Association of College and Research Libraries. (2011, October). *ACRL visual literacy competency standards for higher education*. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy

Cakebread, C. (2017, August 31). People will take 1.2 trillion digital photos this year - Thanks to smart phones. *Business Insider.* Retrieved from http://www.businessinsider.com/12-trillion-photos-to-be-taken-in-2017-thanks-to-smartphones-chart-2017-8

Caulfield, M. (2017). *Web literacy for student fact-checkers*. Retrieved from https://webliteracy.pressbooks.com

Gervasio, D. (2017). *"Pin the source on the spectrum": Fake news is on a continuum*. Retrieved from http://sandbox.acrl.org/library-collection/pin-source-spectrum-fake-news-continuum

Heyman, S. (2015, June 23). Photos, photos everywhere. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/arts/international/photos-photos-everywhere.html

Kane, G. C., & Pear, A. (2016, January 4). The rise of visual content online. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. Retrieved from http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-rise-of-visual-content-online

Pew Research Center. (2017, August). *Digital news fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news

Pew Research Center. (2017, September). *News use across social media platforms 2017*. Retrieved from http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017

YouTube. (2017). *YouTube for press*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/yt/about/press