

Stephanie A. Diaz and Russell A. Hall

# Fighting fake news

## Inspiring critical thinking with memorable learning experiences

**D**espite fake news having a long and notorious history in the United States, it seemed like a brand-new phenomenon to many people during the 2016 presidential campaign. Four years later, we continue to grapple with the understanding that the fake news issue is a symptom of a perfect storm

of political polarization, shifting U.S. demographics, labor market upheaval, the proliferation of social media use, foreign interference, and normal human psychology. With no clear solutions in sight, the battle against fake news continues. Fake news has many trou-

bling implications for life outside of the academy, but it also has serious consequences for student learning. From the perspective of undergraduate students, it may seem that in this post-truth era, anyone with a cellphone can create news, journalists have ulterior motives, news organizations cannot be trusted, debate centers on reaffirming one's worldview, and nothing is knowable because

there is always evidence on both sides of an argument. Despite this, we believe learning experiences designed to be memorable can change students' perspectives and make a lasting impression.

Most academic librarians who have written about fake news focused on analyzing

it as a concept, highlighting contextual influences and debating the library's role in addressing this problem. In this article, we use the phrase "fake news" to refer to Merriam-Webster's definitions of disinformation ("false information deliberately and often covertly

spread") and misinformation ("incorrect or misleading information.")<sup>1</sup> When we discuss



Penn State-Behrend students travel to the Newseum in Washington, D.C.

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the fake news issue, we refer not only to disinformation and misinformation, but also the political, technological, and psychological influences that affect how and why we come in contact with, perceive, and share fake news. Although academic librarians are still exploring their roles in addressing the fake news issue, they consistently argue the importance of information and media literacy education. Since librarians have been promoting information literacy for decades, Carolyn Osborne raises “attention deficit” as an important aspect to consider and asks, “. . . how does one attract the attention of those who need information literacy education the most?”<sup>2</sup> In the following case study we describe a series of extracurricular programs focused on fake news that attempted to raise awareness of the problem in ways that went beyond traditional classroom learning and sought to create memorable learning experiences.

### **Case study**

With more than 4,000 students enrolled, Penn State-Behrend is one of the largest of the more than 20 Penn State campuses. Initial efforts to combat fake news at Penn State-Behrend began when the director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences created a Fake News Interest Group, a small group of about seven faculty, librarians, and students. The group met several times in fall 2017 to swap anecdotes and share information from each other’s disciplinary perspectives. Members learned from each other and validated each other’s experiences, but the librarians left the meetings wanting to share these conversations with more people, especially students.

The librarians brainstormed ideas for fake news outreach programs that could move from simply discussing the issue to teaching and learning about it. The primary goals of the programs would be to promote an appreciation of a free press, awareness of journalistic processes and ethics, and awareness of psychological factors influencing the fake news phenomenon. We designed the pro-

grams to try to humanize the experts on the topic and make the experiences memorable. The final series consisted of three events: a trip to the Newseum in Washington, D.C.; a panel discussion with local faculty; and a Q&A session with local journalists.

### **Trip to the Newseum**

Our first idea was to visit the Newseum in Washington, D.C., a museum dedicated to teaching about the First Amendment and the importance of the free press. Surprisingly, after we made travel arrangements, the organizers of the 2018 March for Our Lives announced that their demonstration would happen on the exact same date. At first, we were concerned about alienating students who might think that the trip was politically biased and designed to coincide with the march. However, we kept our reservations, because we anticipated national news coverage and felt this would give the students an ability to compare their experience to the news coverage. The trip was jointly funded by the library and by Behrend’s Student Activity Fee Committee (SAF). One of the stipulations of SAF funding is that activities must be open to any Penn State-Behrend student, which was our original intent. We promoted the trip to students by sending campuswide emails and by posting digital signs across campus. Our van could only accommodate 13 students, so we were forced to limit participation. However, only seven students participated, as six students did not show up at our 5 a.m. departure time. Though 29 students were on the waitlist, it was impossible to find replacements due to the early hour.

To strengthen the experience, we played several podcasts during the drive including Reply All’s “Voyage into Pizzagate,”; Radiolab’s “Breaking News,” which investigates “deepfakes” as the next stage in disinformation; and Planet Money’s “Finding the Fake News King.” We also selected and adapted several activities originally created by the Newseum staff that are designed to encourage engagement with the exhibits. Students

were asked to complete two of these activities. Because most of the students had never visited Washington before, we also encouraged them to explore the National Mall after visiting the Newseum. We departed Washington at 5 p.m. and arrived back at campus around midnight.

### Faculty panel discussion

For the next event in the series, we invited four group members of the Fake News Interest Group (all faculty), to discuss the topic from their disciplinary perspectives.

We wanted to give students an opportunity to hear from faculty, possibly outside of their majors and outside of the scope of their courses. We also hoped that attendees would leave the event with a more holistic perspective of the issue.

The speakers included two psychology professors, a communications instructor (and former journalist), and a political scientist whose work centers on post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe. The speakers focused primarily on the impact of social media and its ability to spread fake news widely and rapidly. However, the communications instructor and the political scientist both firmly noted the positive effects social media has had for giving voice to those who are traditionally marginalized and to those who are fighting repressive regimes throughout the world.

The communications instructor described

the role of the journalist and discussed ethics in journalism regarding those with political power and how “friendly” relationships can sometimes turn journalists into political pawns and, in the worst cases, instruments of government propaganda. The political scientist explained how Russia used fake news to generate unrest in Ukraine during that nation’s 2014 revolution. Russia used these fake news stories to later justify their military takeover of the Crimea region of Ukraine and sow division between ethnic Russians living in Ukraine and other Ukrainians. Echoes of this



View of the 2018 March for Our Lives demonstration at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.

could then be seen in Russian attempts to disrupt the 2016 U.S. elections, particularly in the use of fake stories to stoke political polarization.

The psychology professors primarily spoke about cognitive biases that we all share.

Confirmation bias, the tendency to assimilate new information in such a way that it conforms to an individual’s pre-existing beliefs, was discussed at length. They also discussed the backfire effect, cognitive dissonance, motivated reasoning, and naïve realism. Approximately 70 students, faculty, staff, and community members attended this event.

### Local paper editor and reporter

For our final event, we hoped to provide attendees the opportunity to hear directly from journalists. We invited Doug Oathout, editor, and Ed Palatella, investigative reporter, from our local paper, the Erie Times-

News, to discuss their profession and their work processes. Both journalists eagerly agreed to participate in a question-and-answer format. We prepared a list of 12 questions and shared them with Oathout and Palatella ahead of time, so they were prepared to provide more in-depth answers. They were also happy to answer questions from the audience.

The reporters began the event by sharing their backgrounds, education, and how they both came to work for newspapers. Oathout and Palatella discussed how they generate leads for stories and how they write their articles. They also stressed that the paper is deeply concerned with getting the facts right on all their stories. The Internet has changed their jobs drastically because the 24-hour news cycle dictates that they have to be ready to publish a story to the web at any time. They gave examples from that very day of getting text messages right up to the time they went on stage. The editor said that only once in 20-plus years had he allowed the use of an unnamed source because he feels that it costs journalists some credibility if they rely too much on anonymous sources. In national news, he said it can be different because sources often have a fear of retaliation. In wrapping up, both journalists stressed that they wanted the public to know that they do their jobs because they are part of the community and that they do their best every day to work on the public's behalf. Although we expected a better turnout, roughly 40 people attended the event. While most attendees were students, the audience also consisted of faculty, staff, community members, the campus chancellor, and a representative from the office of a state senator.

## Survey

At the conclusion of each event, we distributed a short survey. Two quantitative questions were asked using a five-point Likert scale about the quality and value of each program. Subsequent qualitative questions were geared toward determining what participants learned and how they believed it

would change their future behavior (if at all).

A total of 34 individuals participated in our survey, and all three events were highly rated. On a five-point scale, the Newseum trip rated as 4.9 for the quality and 5 in value of the program. The Q&A with the journalists rated as 4.1 for quality and 4 for value. The panel discussion of faculty experts rated 4.1 for quality and 4.3 for value.

Nearly all responses fell under two broad themes: increased awareness and expected change(s) in behavior. Speaking about the podcasts played during the trip, one student wrote, "It really opened my eyes to how easy it can be to create 'fake news.'" Another student stated, "I want to call people out for spreading misinformation." An attendee from the journalist Q&A stated, "I honestly wasn't aware of the hard work people go through to check sources and make sure what they publish or what was published is true." Another said, "I learned that local news is not immune to being called 'fake news.'" Following the faculty panel, one participant wrote that they would, "Find experts to disprove or fact check news (librarians)," and another said that they would, "Use Snopes to check credibility of website." The biggest surprise in the results were the few attendees who responded that they would not change their consumption of, or perspective on, news. Based on their other responses, these participants were likely already knowledgeable about the topic or it was closely related to their area of study.

## Conclusion

It is very common in academic librarianship to have trouble recruiting students to attend events outside of class, and these programs were no different. Despite this challenge, we plan to continue to build our library's programming and to reach out to students about this important topic. Even though we took great care to plan the events as neutrally as possible, some might consider a few of the activities as biased. Regarding the podcasts, there were substantial difficul-

ties finding quality shows from one side of the political spectrum. As for March for Our Lives, it was pure chance that the rally happened at the same time as the trip. Despite our efforts at balance and neutrality, criticism on the grounds of bias comes with the territory of discussing fake news.

Even so, we believe librarians should not shy away from using politicized examples. For students to be able to negotiate truth in news, they need to be confronted with topics that conflict with their worldview, and they need time and space to consider real-world examples. While not every library will have the ability to offer a trip, local faculty and local reporters are excellent free resources for programs like these. As librarians continue to identify new approaches to addressing

fake news, we challenge our colleagues to step outside of their comfort zones to create memorable and enduring learning experiences for their students.

## Notes

1. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “disinformation (n.),” accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>, Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “misinformation (n.),” accessed January 24, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/misinformation>.

2. Caroline L. Osborne, “Programming to Promote Information Literacy in the Era of Fake News,” *International Journal of Legal Information* 46, no. 2 (2018): 102. *zz*

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*(“Revitalizing your library faculty governance,” continues from page 238)*

tioning to faculty so that they know you’re continuing to monitor the issue.

## Conclusion

Shared governance is an important right for library faculty, and participation is crucial to its success. While library faculty governance can at times be tedious, it doesn’t have to be boring. By making a few simple changes, you can encourage your faculty to follow important issues, speak up about their concerns, and pitch in when work is

needed. Once the precedent for active participation is set, it will be a lot harder for library faculty governance to slide back into stagnation.

## Note

1. Gary A. Olsen, “Exactly What Is ‘Shared Governance?’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 55 (2009): A33-A35, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Exactly-What-Is-Shared/47065> (accessed October 17, 2009). *zz*

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