Fake news and alternative facts: five challenges for academic libraries

In light of recent worldwide political developments, it seems clear that libraries are needed more than ever to combat a rising tide of fake news and public lies, and to help their patrons discriminate between truth, error and propaganda. In order to do so, however, libraries will have to decide where they stand on crucial questions about the social construction of reality; the politics of selection; the privileging of interpretations; the academic necessity of research access to false claims; and the meaning of 'alternative'. A library that fails to address these questions carefully, and in advance, is doomed to incoherence in its response to fake news and 'alternative facts'.

On the face of it, it might seem as if the problem of fake news and 'alternative facts' is relatively simple, and the academic library's proper role fairly clear: fakery and mendacity in reporting – whether journalistic, scientific or scholarly – are repugnant and contrary to everything we stand for in libraries and in academia generally. The library's clear role is both to defend the truth and to help library patrons discriminate between reality and lies.

Recent political developments in the US, the UK and elsewhere prompt us to think about this role with a bit more urgency than might have seemed necessary in the past. As we see many within the populations we serve apparently being swayed by false claims that are sometimes merely ridiculous, and sometimes terrifying in their capacity (if taken seriously) to do real harm to real people, we in libraries naturally wonder how we can most effectively stand in defense of truth against those who abuse it.

Again, it sounds simple. And yet, there is a problem – multiple problems, actually. Let us examine some of them one by one.

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Problem No. 1: 'truth' and the academy

First, in order to defend truth, we will have to agree that truth exists and can be known. This may seem like a trivial or even absurd concern. It is not.

When we characterize one media report as 'true' and another as 'fake', or insist on a distinction between 'actual' facts and 'alternative' (i.e. false) facts, we are relying on Enlightenment concepts of reason, objective truth and warranting evidence. In academia, these concepts have been controversial, and in some quarters explicitly rejected, for decades. Significant and influential schools of academic inquiry rely, in varying degrees, on the belief that reality is socially constructed and that appeals to 'objective truth' are to be understood as hegemonic strategies designed to preserve the privilege of those in power. Other schools of academic thought grant that objective reality does exist, but argue that it is impossible to *know* it objectively – that our perceptions and biases impose filters on our perception of reality such that, in practice, there is no such thing as objectivity; there exist only billions of different subjectivities. From this perspective, the pure truth may indeed be out there, but no one can be relied upon as an authoritative witness of it.

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For obvious reasons, the more one accepts either of these propositions – that the concept of objective truth is merely a political tool, or that objective truth is effectively unknowable – the more challenging it is to stand on behalf of the 'reality-based community' as a defender of 'real facts' as opposed to fake news or alternative facts. From either of these perspectives, politicians and others who put forth 'counterfactual' accounts of the world around them are doing nothing different from what all of us inescapably do: wielding what power they have to construct a reality that promotes their interests. When we oppose their framing of reality, we are not defending objective truth, but rather, simply defending our own interests and prerogatives.

These postmodern, social-constructivist positions are by no means universally held in academia, but constructivism continues to be an influential current of academic thought particularly within the social sciences and the humanities. To the degree that we propose to defend objective truth against politically expedient lies, we are rejecting constructivism; to the degree that we take constructivism seriously, we undermine our ability to speak out on behalf of absolute truth and objective reality.

> 'constructivism continues to be an influential current of academic thought'

Clearly, these considerations have significant, real-world implications for libraries and for anyone else who wishes to stand up for objective reality and to help others distinguish between truth and falsehood. If either objective reality, or our ability reliably to perceive reality, is a myth, then there is not much point in getting exercised about fake news. Who is to say what is fake? What if I 'know' a news story is fake, but it is real to you? Why should my reality be privileged over yours?

But for the sake of argument, let us assume that we all agree that objective reality exists, and furthermore that we can rely on the evidence of our senses in distinguishing truth and reality from lies and illusion, and that we can depend on principles of logic to help us make sense of reality. In our role as librarians, does this leave us with a clear path forward in helping our patrons recognize and reject false narratives and assertions?

Sadly, no. It only leads us to the next problem.

Problem No. 2: inevitable selectivity

Having agreed, for the sake of argument, to assume that objective facts exist and can reliably be perceived, now let us also assume that objective facts themselves have no intrinsic political content – that politics is an interpretive layer we place on top of objective facts, or a lens through which we look at them and try to make sense of them. If this is true, then it would seem that libraries have the option of simply making facts – real, objectively true facts – available to their patrons, without imposing any specific filter of politics or interpretation on them, and that we can then encourage our patrons to engage critically with those objective facts and interpret them for themselves. Here we run into a problem, though. Even if we assume that individual facts are non-political, the *selective presentation* of facts is a different matter entirely. In fact, you could reasonably argue that *selectively* making facts available to others is inevitably political – and we in libraries have no choice but to collect, curate and present truths selectively, since we have insufficient resources to do otherwise. No library, however enormous and well-funded its collection and however diligent its librarians, can contain and make available all possible facts about every possible topic. We have no choice but to include some facts and exclude others from our offerings, and the criteria we employ in doing so will inevitably be informed by our values – not only our institutional missions, but also our individual senses of what is good, right and appropriate.

> 'We have no choice but to include some facts and exclude others from our offerings'

Hang on, though. Is this really a problem? Does the inevitable selectivity of our offerings fatally undermine the library's goal (assuming such a goal exists) of political neutrality and of dispassionately presenting a variety of viewpoints on crucial issues?

I would suggest that when it comes to our practices and services generally, this reality does in fact significantly undermine any claim libraries might make to be strictly neutral. No matter how hard we try, our collecting strategies and even the services we offer will reflect our biases and preferences, at least to some degree. However, in the more limited context of standing up for the truth and against fake news and fake facts, I believe that our capacity to demonstrate meaningful political neutrality is greater. The key is to apply the same criteria of validity to any proposition, regardless of whose agenda it seems to support and what person or group is advancing it. If we value political neutrality and scrupulous fairness, we will not put our thumb on the scales when helping a patron determine the truthfulness of a claim that we find congenial, nor will we work extra hard to debunk a claim that we find personally offensive. We may be forced by resource limitations to add books to our collections on a selective basis, but we will not select more books that appeal to our own prejudices and fewer that we disagree with.

'If we value political neutrality and scrupulous fairness, we will not put our thumb on the scales'

It is worth noting, however, that not everyone agrees libraries should try to be neutral. In recent years there has been a growing call for libraries to abandon their traditional neutrality (or, as some would have it, abandon their traditional pretense of neutrality).[1,2] Clearly, those who see the library as a tool for either progressive social change or the preservation of traditional values cannot support the idea of a politically neutral library. If the library's purpose is either to promote or discourage social change, then the library's job is not to present a variety of viewpoints as objectively as possible and encourage its patrons to think critically and choose for themselves – its job in that case is to promote those viewpoints that encourage or foster one goal and either block or disparage those that encourage the other.

All of that being said, let us now assume for the sake of argument that libraries can, indeed, be reasonably politically neutral in their work, and that such neutrality is a good and appropriate goal. For the moment we will take it as given that unless a library has been established for the specific purpose of promoting a specific social or political perspective (as might be the case at a school with a specific religious or political mission, for example), the library should endeavor, to the best of its ability, to present objectively true facts in an unbiased way.

Let us quickly review where we are. For the sake of argument, we have now granted that:

1. There is such a thing as objective reality.
2. Human beings are sufficiently equipped to recognize it consistently and reliably.
3. Libraries both can and should be expected to help people distinguish between objective truth and falsity and to think critically about it for themselves (rather than pushing patrons toward a predetermined social or political position).

This leaves us with three other problems to consider.

Problem No. 3: selecting and promoting interpretations

Given that the great majority of texts and other documents that libraries collect and curate represent interpretations (rather than strictly objective representations) of reality, we must decide whether all *interpretations* of truth will be treated equally, or whether some interpretations will be privileged above others. If the former, how will we ensure that they are treated equally? And if the latter, then by what criteria will we decide which interpretations are privileged and which are treated as suboptimal – or simply excluded altogether?

'we must decide whether all *interpretations* of truth will be treated equally'

Remember: just because objective truth exists, and even if we agree that truth *can be* established with reasonable objectivity, it does not follow that every particular perception or interpretation of it can be taken as equally authoritative. In fact, a great many of the documented interpretations of reality to which libraries broker access are in strong

opposition to each other, and may even be mutually exclusive. A book arguing that the dangers of global climate change are grossly exaggerated conflicts with one arguing that climate change is a real and pressing problem (even if both draw upon at least some of the same objectively true facts); a journal dedicated to promoting robust government regulation of industry will conflict with one that consistently promotes laissez-faire neoliberalism (even if both agree on a similar set of basic economic data points); and so forth. Will the library select its materials based on the librarians' beliefs not only about how the world *is*, but also about how it *should be*? And assuming that the library takes an explicit stance of neutrality and diversity, how diverse will its collection be – will it include racist publications, or books that advocate violent revolution?

Of the three issues we have addressed so far, this one may be the most difficult. Obviously, it is a longstanding problem for libraries, not one that has suddenly arisen in light of current controversies about fake news. But it becomes particularly acute as our political culture becomes more polarized and our political discourse more divisive. I will propose one possible approach to this problem here: I submit that although no library can present every possible viewpoint on every issue, and is not under any obligation to provide a neutral forum for calls to racist violence or class warfare, libraries nevertheless have a responsibility to present a reasonably broad range of views on social and scholarly topics. How broad? This is not quantifiable, obviously – but certainly broad enough to facilitate and inform genuine critical thinking on the part of patrons, rather than simply confirming patrons in their pre-existing biases (or those of the librarians). No library will do this perfectly – no organization does anything perfectly – but that does not have to stop the library from moving in the direction of that ideal.

> 'libraries … have a responsibility to present a reasonably broad range of views on social and scholarly topics'

Problem No. 4: the necessity of studying lies

A fourth problem that libraries face when trying to stand up in defense of truth is the fact that our collections – the books and other resources that we deliberately place in front of our patrons – inevitably consist of falsehoods as well as truths. These falsehoods are not only there by accident, or because we have failed to detect and exclude them; if we are doing our jobs, they will also be there by design.

> 'our collections … inevitably consist of falsehoods as well as truths'

How can I say that? To illustrate this principle, consider Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This is not a book that has a place in library collections because of its intrinsic qualities: its arguments are in many ways incoherent, its tone is overwrought, the ideas it promotes are horrifying. And yet, no academic library that supports research and teaching on 20th-century politics can afford to exclude *Mein Kampf* from its collection. Why? Because that book sheds light, in a way that no other book does, on ideas and philosophies that shaped major events of world history during that century. To exclude *Mein Kampf* from a research library collection on the basis of its objective falsehood and racist idiocy would hamstring the library's ability to support research into European political history.

Mein Kampf is only an extreme example of a collecting principle that we must apply in much more subtle and mundane ways every day. A putatively non-fiction book published last year is revealed to have been filled with invented stories; a trauma survivor's tale turns out to have been based on false memories; the memoir by an unrepentant member of the Ku Klux Klan hits No. 5 in the *New York Times* bestseller list. Do we withdraw these books, or decline to purchase them, based on the noxiousness or falsity of their content? It depends entirely on the purpose and mission of our library. I would suggest, for example, that a library that supports research and teaching on the American civil rights movement definitely needs to own a copy of that Klan memoir.

To the previous three propositions that we have accepted for the sake of argument, I would therefore suggest one more:

4. In libraries we do not try to prevent our patrons from encountering falsehood; instead, we do what we can to help them read critically and come to valid, well-informed conclusions about what is true and good and what is false and bad.

Problem No. 5: What does 'alternative' mean?

I propose one last area in which librarians should think carefully before jumping to preconceived conclusions: we need to be careful about ridiculing the idea of alternative facts. Here a specific political reference is unavoidable: in a recent and pivotal moment for Trump-era political discourse in the US, the President's aide Kelly Anne Conway defended White House press secretary Sean Spicer's invocation of apparently false data as the use of 'alternative facts'.[3] This produced howls of derision among the punditry, and created a new catch phrase. However, we should be careful about uncritically dismissing the concept of alternative facts itself. In a context like this one, the term could mean at least two very different things. One meaning might be the usage of which Conway and Spicer seem to be availing themselves: 'I don't like the facts as they exist, so I will propose different facts – which are not actually true, but which are more congenial to my position'. This is the sense in which the concept of alternative facts should be resisted by anyone who feels an allegiance to objective truth and reality.

However, the phrase might also refer to an *additional set of true facts* offered as an alternative to those currently on the table. In this sense, one might say, 'Here are some true facts in addition to the ones my opponent has just offered. These alternative facts, which are also true, shed a different light on the issue under discussion.' And it is in this second sense that one might reasonably argue libraries are very much in the business of presenting alternative facts – facts, that is, that are true and possibly very important, but that one is relatively unlikely to encounter in one's dealings with other, more partisan or market-oriented information providers.

Conclusion

As is so often the case, the problem of fake news appears simple on the surface but becomes more complex and treacherous the more one tries to engage with it. Where does all of this leave us, as librarians, with regard to our responsibility towards our patrons and the larger polity? I would propose the following conclusions:

1. We must either declare an allegiance to the existence of objective truth and to the human ability to discern it, or we must leave the fight over fake news, 'fake science' and alternative facts to others. If we do not believe there is such a thing as objective truth, we are not in a position to defend it.
2. This may be the right time for every library to conduct a very open and honest discussion of the criteria by which materials are selected and promoted to patrons as reliable and factual. This should not simply be a review of the library's existing overall collection development policy, but rather a probing discussion of the controlling assumptions that underlie our assessment of what is actually *worthy* of inclusion. Questions that might be asked would include:

   • As a matter of collecting policy, do we acknowledge the existence of such a thing as absolute and objective truth, or is it our position that all truth is socially constructed?
   • In light of our library's position on the first question, what criteria will we apply when deciding what constitutes a factually reliable source?
   • Do factually unreliable documents have a place in the library collection? If so or if not, why?

Until recently it may have seemed possible, and perhaps even desirable, for academic libraries to stand aloof from philosophical and epistemological discussions about the nature of truth and reality. I would suggest that this is no longer the case, and that the time has come for us to decide whether or not we believe that objective truth and reality exist and are objectively discernible from untruth and unreality – and, having done so, to then decide what it implies for the ways in which we build our collections and provide research and other support services.

'the time has come for us to decide whether or not we believe that objective truth and reality exist'

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: **http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa**

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