ALL THAT'S NOT FIT TO PRINT

Fake News and the Call to Action for Librarians and Information Professionals

AMY AFFELT

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Praise for *All That's Not Fit To Print*:

Discerning reliable, authoritative news and information has gotten much harder in this connected, technologically driven era. Amy Affelt provides a useful and informative guide to navigating the challenges—and an important call to arms for librarians and information specialists to play a leading role in defending and advancing the importance of objective facts on behalf of all of us.

> —Matt Murray, Editor In Chief,
> *The Wall Street Journal*

Librarians are on the front lines in 21st Century info-wars and struggles over misinformation and weaponized narratives. Library patrons would dearly love it if they had nearby trustworthy allies to help them navigate these new societal challenges. Luckily, Amy Affelt has created a playbook for her colleagues, showing them how they can exploit their talents to be reliable knowledge stewards to their communities in an ever-more confusing world.

> —Lee Rainie, Director of Internet and Technology
> Research, Pew Research Center

In this age of misinformation, librarians play a crucial role in helping people make sense of what is true or not. This book is an excellent tool for anyone interested in improving their information diet, with practical tips for finding quality sources, as well as

techniques and tools for checking out content sourced online. Most importantly, this book places our current situation in a wider historical context. As humans, we've always been drawn to rumors and conspiracies, but how can we cope when digital technologies have supercharged everything, from the creation to the dissemination of false and misleading information? This book shows you how.

—Claire Wardle, PhD, Executive Director,
First Draft

All That's Not Fit To Print is an important and timely resource for information professionals grappling with issues of veracity, authenticity, and authority. It dives deep into current trends to inform the discussion and lays out actionable insights on how we should engage around questionable content.

—John Chrastka, Executive Director,
EveryLibrary

This timely clarion call to arms encourages librarians to be at the forefront of the fake news cultural and political battle, helping them to recognize their evolving roles in today's ethical and technological struggle and to be prepared to fight for the truth.

—Linda Landis Andrews, Director of Internships,
Department of English, University of Illinois at
Chicago

Amy Affelt, in *All That's Not Fit To Print*, has written an effective primer for librarians

and information professionals on the challenge that is fake news. Covering the current development of this across social media, she covers the key issues, a variety of effective tools and resources, and an informed call for librarians to adequately arm themselves to combat the dreaded "fake news" scourge that we find ourselves in. Definitely worth a read for experienced and budding librarians.

—Hal Kirkwood, President, Special Libraries Association, 2019, and Bodleian Business Librarian, Sainsbury Library, Said Business School, University of Oxford

Amy Affelt's *All That's Not Fit To Print* is a timely, intensely interesting, and easy-to-read book full of important, commonsense advice for those of us in the library and information professions who want to hone our skillsets to become information quality experts. It is revolutionary in that it is a book to guide information professionals to realize their role and encourage growth of methods long present in our profession. Affelt's book is a must-read for anyone who wants to learn about information quality from one of the best in our field.

—Anne Craig, Senior Director, Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI)

Gone are the days when we could reasonably trust the news. As long as responsible journalism is under attack, we can no

longer assume that news is grounded in facts and reality. Fortunately, Affelt provides the guidance we need to decide what to believe and what to discard.

—Kimberly Silk, Brightsail Research

With *All That's Not Fit To Print* author Amy Affelt gives us all that we need to identify and combat the fake news epidemic that is causing confidence in media to significantly decline. While aimed at libraries and librarians who are leading the way in developing digital and information literacy skills, this book's advice is for everyone who seeks to ensure that the information they use and share is of the highest quality. Kudos to Amy Affelt for producing a very readable, enjoyable, and easy to understand guide to separating distortions, misinformation, and lies from the high-quality information we need to make good decisions on a daily basis.

—Donna Scheeder, President, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), 2015–2017, and President, Library Strategies International

Reasoned and passionate, thorough and provocative, Amy Affelt's latest does much more than recap the issues and name the disease: she's created a clear roadmap for

librarians and media people alike to ensure reality-based reportage not only survives but flourishes.

—Brendan Howley, Library Advocacy Specialist, Media Software Designer and Former CBC TV Investigative Journalist

Informative, insightful, in-depth. Amy Affelt uses her expertise, as a noteworthy research librarian, to teach others about fake news and how to work the complex and convoluted process of obtaining accurate informational text. *All That's Not Fit To Print* is helpful, timely, and relevant.

—Angela Falter Thomas, PhD, Associate Professor of Literacy Education, Bowling Green State University

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For my husband, Michael G. Leslie, who is literally wearing it.

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INTRODUCTION

For as long as I can remember, news has played a central role in my life. Every day of my childhood, I woke up to WLPO, the local AM radio station that broadcasted all of the overnight happenings of our community of 10,000 residents, to which my father listened while he prepared for work. If it were a summer day, I would then walk a few blocks northeast to my Grandma and Grandpa Affelt's home, where WLPO's popular program, *The Clearinghouse*, would be on. A kind of early precursor to Craigslist, *The Clearinghouse* featured local residents phoning in and trying to sell everything from a set of snow tires to a litter of kittens to any interested neighbors. Next, I traveled across the alley to my Grandmother Hughett's home, where she could be found on her patio with the previous night's local newspaper, *The News Tribune*, checking out the latest adventures in the *Brenda Starr* comic strip, and working the crossword puzzle. At the end of each day, my mother would read to me from *Chicago Tribune* columnists Mike Royko and Ann Landers, even though Chicago seemed as far away as Mars to a young girl growing up amid the cornfields of central Illinois.

It never occurred to any of us in our family or community that the news that we consumed on a daily basis was anything but, as a character on a popular television program of the time

espoused, "just the facts, ma'am." We trusted the content in every story and report that we read. We believed the written word of the reporters and writers as if it were sacrosanct. Sure, there was occasional hyperbole, but it was easy to spot. Humor was relegated to sections labeled as such, and perhaps we were a bit naïve, but critical judgment regarding source was not a consideration. We were pedestrian consumers of information; we weren't considering it in a professional context. Although I didn't know it at the time, that was the work of librarians.

Evaluating information integrity and quality has always been part and parcel to the mission of librarianship. On a basic level, the library itself is a repository of content and information, and none of it is fake news. Patrons should be confident that if they consume their news from the library, they are receiving accurate content. However, the library is not the primary source of news or information for American consumers. A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that 67% of Americans get at least some of their news from social media, and they are getting it from multiple outlets; Pew found that 26% of American adults get their news from two or more social media sites (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). In this brave new world, the role of the librarian is more important than ever before, not because we are no longer the main conduits of news content for consumers, but in spite of it. If our patrons are getting their news from social media, Google search results, and shares from "friends," they are definitely no longer looking to the library as the chief source of news content (if they ever did). Therefore, librarians need to be much more than providers of factual content. We need to help our requestors make critical choices regarding which news to consume. We need to ensure that they understand how to determine what is real and what is fake, and that process begins with our own training and continuing education

regarding information veracity and quality and data sourcing and transparency.

Luckily, librarians are well poised to lead the fight against fake news, and indeed, we have already been tapped as the profession best able to determine the accuracy of information content. It was a proud librarian moment for me when Christiane Amanpour, CNN's chief international correspondent, used a graphic from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in a segment on spotting fake news in February 2017 (IFLA Website, 2017). The IFLA infographic offers numerous red flags to look for when determining veracity of news, and Amanpour's endorsement lent credibility not only to IFLA's checklist but also to IFLA itself and its member librarians as guides through the landmines of misinformation. Indeed, the final admonishment in the list is "Ask an Expert," with a subtitle of "Ask a Librarian." If there were any doubt that this should be our mission, an endorsement from Christiane Amanpour should be all that we need in order to reinforce a role that we always knew that we had. However, even if we have worked in information literacy before, others may have been unaware of our specialized training in this area, so it is critically important that we market our skills and abilities in order to be seen as the go-to professionals for finding relevant information and data from high-quality sources. It may not seem like a new role to us, but it may be seen that way to others, so in that case, it is, in a way, a new role for librarians to assume. We also need to become and remain first and foremost in the minds of the decision-makers at the organizations in which we work, whether they are senior executives at corporations, partners at law firms, deans at universities, or boards of directors of public libraries.

Marketing is always tricky, and marketing ourselves as truth-tellers in an era of quick information that is accessed

outside of our presence can seem daunting. However, the good news is that we already have the skills; we just need the promotional tools and self-confidence to make them known. Most of us took information literacy courses in library school and we practice their tenets on a daily basis. Determining which data and content are needed, finding that information from the most credible source, and accessing it, analyzing it, and packaging it in a way that resonates most clearly with our stakeholders are among the most basic activities of a reference librarian. We just need to be able to market the services that we currently provide within the landscape of a world of alternative facts and fake news. Our requestors are probably aware that we undertake these activities, but they might not make the connection that their importance takes on a new urgency in the current climate. Not sure how to get started? Think of the tagline, "Is This Real News? Only Librarians Know for Sure."

When we serve as purveyors of truth and position ourselves as the professionals best able to help others navigate fake news, we also expand our skill sets and open ourselves up to new career options. Not only do we practice the skills explained above and "lead by example" when working on reference projects, but also we are able to teach information literacy and best practices for evaluating information to others. Further, we are expert at judging the quality of the information retrieval systems themselves. While we have always worked with proprietary databases and have always understood which types of indexing and metadata form the components of a robust, effective search engine that returns relevant results, it is likely that others in our organizations do not have this same expertise.

The following elements of the "Competencies for Information Professionals" document from the Special Libraries Association (SLA) directly address skills that librarians can

use in establishing themselves as experts in determining fake news (Special Libraries Association, 2016):

- Systematically evaluating new or unfamiliar resources by applying analytical frameworks and methods;
- Delivering authoritative information resources to meet the needs of a particular audience, cover a certain topic, field, or discipline, or serve a particular purpose;
- Teaching others to critically evaluate information and information sources;
- Critical thinking, including qualitative and quantitative reasoning;
- Assessing the veracity or quality of information and its underlying sources in search engines and information retrieval systems.

Imagine the damage to an organization if misinformation, bad data, and erroneous facts are used. In corporations and law firms, they can cause the loss of a client or case, but in hospitals and medical centers, they can literally be a matter of life and death. If we position ourselves as the professionals who can best help our requestors avoid worst-case scenarios and information and data disasters and are seen as expert in doing so, not only will we be seen as hugely important assets but also we can teach others in the organization about our best practices and the ways to avoid the pitfalls that could truly lead to an institution's downfall.

How can we do this? This book will show you how. Whether you are a public librarian assisting patrons who need to understand the real way that the Affordable Care Act works, a corporate librarian using data in order to land a client, close a deal, or market a product, a law firm librarian who needs to find precedential law for an attorney building a

case, or an academic librarian assisting professors with research, this book explains best research practices, how to maintain them, and how to teach them to others.

Fake news can have many different meanings. It can be deliberately created with a goal of misleading, a result of shoddy research, satire accidentally taken seriously, or a combination of those scenarios along with many more. This book explains the different forms fake news can take and the motivations behind individuals who create this content. It reviews several different guiding documents for spotting fake news and outlines best practices for spotting fake news and assisting requestors in doing the same.

A large portion of this book is dedicated to how fake news spreads through social media. Social media is the major conduit for the dissemination of fake news and as of this writing, no all-encompassing, foolproof remedies have been devised. In explaining the various offered solutions, whether they were actually implemented or remain in beta, this book takes a look at the complexities of social media platforms and their advertiser-supported business models. Since shedding light on fake news does not generate revenue, social media platforms have no incentive to call it out. IT and technology thought leaders have offered solutions and visions for an ideal social media world; this book discusses these options and their feasibility. Finally, this book considers the future of information sources and content. What will the future of fake news look like? What new tools and skills will librarians and information professionals need to not only navigate but also lead in this brave new world?

This book is for you if you:

- find yourself wondering, "What is meant by the term 'fake news'? How did we get here?";
- are looking for tools to use in order to spot fake news;

- would like to learn how to teach others how to select quality sources and choose quality content and data;
- are a library and information science (LIS) student and want to learn about the challenges of dealing with fake news in the field;
- need to determine how to find quality text and data sources for basic reference requests;
- want to learn more about the fake news/social media relationship and potential remedies to the sharing of fake news;
- would like to learn how to market yourself and your skill set to your management in order to become an information quality expert in your organization;
- are curious about the future of fake news and how it will affect our work as librarians.

Students and journalists are already looking to librarians as the experts in determining fake news. Whether or not we have the desire to assume this role is largely up to us, but in a way, it isn't a choice, as we are already there. Whether you want to apply traditional research and reference skills to the brave new media landscape, and market yourself and your skills in order to become an information veracity expert, or just want to learn more about the current news climate and make sure you and your organization "get it right," this book is for you.

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