



Addressing Information Pollution: an action plan for the most trusted profession

“Information Pollution”

(<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/misinformation-cybercrime-covid-pan-demic/>) was a new term to me when I came across it. The WEF provided this eloquent articulation of misinformation or disinformation; or what those of a more political persuasion might label “fake” news. The global dependence on digital media and social media for news and awareness is seen as a force for good; ensuring safety, connectivity and an informed citizenry. It can limit the bias of mainstream media, providing on the ground, eye witness accounts of events.

The same technologies are used to create a false narrative to amplify polarising forces and distort public discourse. Weaponizing technology, including synthetic media and counterfeits, is better understood and seen as a major threat to rational dialogue and “evidence-based policymaking”. Technology companies are vested in addressing these issues but struggle to keep pace. The United Nations (<https://info.constellaintelligence.com/undp-report-covid-19-information-pollution>) found that 0.7% of “users” were polluting activists, generating 25% of the activity in a debate.

2021 saw the release of the 24th edition of the IPSOS MORI Veracity Index (<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row>), the longest-running poll on trust in professions in Britain. In the last edition, only three professions rated over 90% in terms of trust or telling the truth:

Nurses – 94%

Librarians – 93%

Doctors – 91%

So, while agents are weaponizing social media to pollute information ecosystems, Librarians are well placed to catalyse the noxious elements with information literacy skills by helping others neutralise the damage it might otherwise cause. The UK’s CILIP has the following suggestions (<https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/598408/Combating-disinformation--the-war-in-Ukraine.htm>): Stop, Verify and Correct.

STOP

Consider our own biases

It is important to be conscious of our own biases and prejudice. Are we predisposed to believe one side over the other?

Be skeptical

The Internet has triggered a democratisation of the media. Disinformation and fake news depend on people uncritically sharing information they find online. The best way to avoid being a vector for fake news and disinformation is to be actively skeptical and to apply discernment to what you see.

Ask 'how do I feel?'

A lot of disinformation is intended to provoke an emotional reaction by speaking to our sense of outrage, morality or political values. Take a moment to consider whether the information seems designed to make you angry or worried, rather than conveying the facts.

Ask 'in whose interest?'

Balanced news reporting will focus primarily on giving you a factual account of events and allowing you to draw your own conclusions. If a source seems to be leading you to a conclusion, ask in whose interest it is for the story to be skewed in that direction.

VERIFY

Use trusted sources

There is no such thing as a dispassionate or neutral source. It is always a good sign if a news outlet lets you know upfront what its point of view is!

Read the whole story

It is important to go beyond the headline and read the whole of a story before sharing it. This is particularly important in today's 24-hour news cycle, in which editorial is recycled, updated and amended throughout the day.

Find supporting sources

Corroboration is key to providing good information. If you are sceptical about a piece of news or information, seek other trusted sources which confirm the original. This is not fool proof, some disinformation is supported by a wide range of apparently authoritative sources.

Apply critical judgment

As an information professional, you know how easily images and video can be faked or manipulated.

CORRECT

Share better information

Once you have verified a piece of information, you can act as a 'node' in the network which shares and promotes it. Help combat fake news by washing better information through the system.

Call out disinformation

Where you spot fake news or disinformation being shared. Call it out and provide a link to the information or evidence that proves it is false.

Be a trusted source

Libraries are widely trusted as sources of authoritative and impartial information (noting that no source is ever 'neutral'). As a librarian or information professional, you can assemble information, displays, reading materials and other sources to provide a fair and balanced view.

Educate others

As librarians and information professionals, we are well placed to educate others about fake news and disinformation and to help them develop their digital, media and information literacy.

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Contact [Stephen Phillips](#) for more information.

Stephen Phillips is a global leader, influencer and advisor with over 30 years of experience in knowledge and information management, document services, analytics, and vendor management.