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The Role of Libraries in Avoiding Hate Speech and False Information

Ari Haasio, PhD, M.A., Principal Lecturer, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences,
Finland, E-mail: ari.haasio@seamk.fi

Markku Mattila, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Tampere University; Senior Researcher,
Migration Institute of Finland, E-mail: markku.mattila@utu.fi

Anu Ojaranta, PhD Student, M.A., Åbo Akademi, E-mail: anu.ojaranta@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of libraries in the fight against fake news and hate speech is discussed in this article. Fake news can be understood as misinformation. On the other hand fake media which publishes fake news is not a new phenomenon and it has a long history.

One of the main objectives of public libraries is to promote a sense of community, pluralism and cultural diversity. The role of libraries in supporting media and information literacy (MIL) is important. In the future, the focus should be on mapping, and developing the media and information literacy skills of library employees and customers in public libraries. Disseminating distorted information deliberately is not the task of the library.

Keywords: information literacy, hate speech, fake media, media education, libraries

Introduction

Fake news and hate speech have become current topics in the past years. Especially when Donald Trump, the president of the United States, started to speak about post truth era and called ABC, NBC and other media houses fake media, the questions of fake media and its real essence have become actual. Immigration and the number of refugees have increased significantly in the last five years. In the past few years, several terrorist attacks by immigrants have taken place in Europe. This has contributed to an increase in the critical debate in the press and, above all, in social media. At the same time, it has also increased aggressive, hate speech-like reactions in social media.

In this article we discuss the definition of fake media and hate speech. The focus is on libraries and librarians; how can we support our customers in recognizing fake media, using reliable sources and avoiding hate speech? Libraries should promote democracy and equality all over the world. That is why it is important to fight against misinformation

and disinformation and support tolerance. In this article we discuss the possibilities that libraries have to manage the task.

False information vs. true information

According to Karlova and Fisher (2013) misinformation is false or misleading information that, according to them, may be false, as well as incomplete, ambiguous, or inaccurate. "Disinformation" stands for fraudulent information. Fake news can be either misinformation or disinformation depending on the motives that the writer or publisher has. In many cases fake news is disinformation because wrong and misleading information is given by purpose. This takes us to the question of whether the disinformation and misinformation was conveyed intentionally or unintentionally. The role of the information broker or information producer is of a particular interest in finding out if the inaccurate and erroneous information is the outcome of their own incomplete information or incorrect information.

One of the central concepts in the field of social constructionism is the subjectivity of knowledge. Knowledge is generated through social interaction, and is thus socially constructed and subjective in nature. Further, according to an epistemological view (e.g. Gadamer 1999) which represents a hermeneutic research tradition, knowledge is always tied to an interpreter.

Our knowledge is based on the information we get and interpret. The influence it has on our opinions, our views and our worldview is significant. In some cases it is difficult to draw a line between true and false information. However, information that holds true facts can, in principle, be regarded as reliable information. Plato (Theaetetus, esp. 201c–210d) drew a line between knowledge and opinion. Knowledge is certain, opinion is not.

Hate Speech

Hate speech has existed for hundreds, even thousands of years. Senator Marcus Porcius Cato Major (234–149 BC) repeatedly said at the Roman Senate that "*Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam*" (Carthage must be destroyed) when he ended his speech. Martin Luther (1543), for example, was guilty of religion-based hate speeches in his work, especially in his anti-Semitic treatise *Von den Jüden und ihren Lügen*.

The concept of hate speech is complicated. One useful definition is made by The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers:

"For the purposes of the application of these principles, the term "hate speech" shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin."

According to Kelpi et al. (2017) the target of hate speech varies in different countries. For example in Finland the target is often refugees, but in some other European countries sexual orientation and ethnicity are the most common reasons for hate speech. Kelpi et al. (2017) open up an interesting perspective on the web: since hate speech is defined by the national culture and history it has differing demonstrations in different countries.

Freedom of opinion and freedom of expression are basic rights in democratic society like the United Nation's Declaration states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”
(Article Nineteen of the UN Declaration 1947)

Freedom of opinion and expression does not give us the right to insult people. There is a distinction between hate speech and freedom of the speech.

Silva et al. (2016) have analyzed the targets of hate in social media which has become maybe the most common platform to spread hate speech. Kelpi et al. (2017) claim that hate speech targets are culturally related. According to Silva et al. (2016), the target of hate speech is in most cases the race, unlike in Finnish hate speech

Fake news and fake media

Albright (2017; see also Jaster & Lanius 2018) points out that the term “Fake news” is problematic in application, but useful for framing media ecosystems on a larger scale. For example newspapers and other media have traditionally been organized around “facts”, he states. Now readers publish themselves and fact-based evidence seems to be less important for many. Despite attempts, researchers have yet not succeeded in finding a unanimously agreed definition for “fake news”.

Fake news can also be understood as propaganda (Haasio, Ojaranta & Mattila 2018) based on disinformation. The etymology of this word is based on a cognate for the Russian *dezinformatsia*, taken from the name of a division of the KGB devoted to black propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell 2005). Even though fake media has been discussed a lot lately, it is not a new phenomenon (Uberti 2016; Dornan 2017).

According to Haasio, Ojaranta & Mattila (2017) fake media is the main instrument of "alternative truth". Fake media claim that “mainstream media” is distorting the truth and promising to present things truthfully. The material published by fake media sites is also distributed in a wide variety of social media services and thus contributes to shaping the climate of opinion and acting as a propaganda tool. Like Aro (2016) has stated, propaganda and trolling are new warfare tools. According to her they are used widely in social media to manipulate public debate by spreading disinformation.

The notion of fake media is quite old. The term “lying press” came to the active political use after the revolutions of 1848 in German Confederation (Deutscher Bund). There the conservative Roman Catholic circles debated against the liberal and democratic minded

groups. During the debate the liberal and democratic minded press was as well labelled as “bad press” (schlechte Press) and “lying press” (Lügenpresse) by the conservatives. At that time the link between “lying press” and Jewry was established. (Schmolke 1971; Seidler 2016.) The Germans also used the word “Lügenpresse” in their war propaganda during the Franco-German War (1870–1871) and First World War thus labelling the media of their enemies. After that the term was used by Hitler’s regime. (Heine 2015.)

The role of libraries and librarians

In some countries the idea of democracy and cultural diversity is included in the legislation. According to the Finnish Library law (2016) one of the main goals of public libraries is to promote a sense of community, pluralism and cultural diversity. This implicates the idea of acting against hate speech. According to Batchelor (2017) “Librarians have a professional responsibility to promote critical thinking skills among patrons.”

International Federation of Library Associations has lately underlined the importance to work against fake news in public libraries:

Discussions about fake news has led to a new focus on media literacy more broadly, and the role of libraries and other education institutions in providing this.

According to the Chair of the IFLA Advisory Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression, Martyn Wade, “Freedom of access to information is a right of all, and the increase in activities intended to deliberately mislead citizens leads inevitably to damaging everyone's human rights”. This explicates how important the role of public libraries is understood in the work against fake media. (IFLA 2018.)

One of the main tasks of libraries is to provide timely and reliable information to customers. It is not just fabricated stories and propaganda that is threatening our customers as misinformation. Also pseudoscience, hoaxes and biases are materials we have to recognize as knowledge professionals. According to Merriam-Webster pseudoscience is “a system of theories, assumptions, and methods erroneously regarded as scientific”.

Hansson (2013) says that for a scientist making the difference between science and pseudoscience is like riding a bike. We know the difference, but sometimes it is difficult to formulate it. On the other hand our customers in public libraries are not scientists, researchers or information specialists. For them it will be much more difficult to make the distinction between science and pseudoscience. Here the role of a library is significant. It should be able to direct its customers to distinguish reliable sources from unreliable ones. Hansson (2013) defines pseudoscience and its criteria as follows:

1. It pertains to an issue within the domains of science in the broad sense (the criterion of scientific domain).
2. It suffers from such a severe lack of reliability that it cannot at all be trusted (the criterion of unreliability).

3. It is part of a doctrine whose major proponents try to create the impression that it represents the most reliable knowledge on its subject matter (the criterion of deviant doctrine).

Pseudoscience is contrary to the prevailing scientific paradigm and is not based on research methods and sources generally accepted in science. In many cases libraries have pseudoscientific documents in their collections. The most difficult question is whether they should be there or not.

Recognizing fake news is not always easy. In many cases different fact-checking services (e.g. Politifact, Washington Post Fact Checker) can be used to trace the reliability of different news. In fake media sites the facts and fiction are mixed consciously. Haasio, Ojaranta and Mattila (2017) noticed that fake media publishes both accurate news and pure fake news. That makes it more difficult to estimate reliability. According to the research also sources are mentioned, but they are often misused.

In principle the material published in well-known fake media should be used carefully. Instead of fake media sources we should provide alternative sources which are known to be reliable. The question of reliability is of course complex. In public libraries we should lean on material that does not encourage racism, violence, exploitation, or opinions that violate ethnic groups. Different opinions and views belong to the democratic society, but not the kind of harmful material which defeats human rights.

Hate speech is typically published in fake media and social media sites (see e.g. Silva et al. 2016; Haasio, Ojaranta & Mattila 2018). This places greater demands on libraries and individual librarians, also in terms of extensive knowledge of online material. Librarians need to be able to recognize false information, retrieved from all sources and channels, including the internet.

Discussion

Batchelor (2017) underlines the role of libraries and librarians in the fight against fake news. According to him fact checking and information literacy instruction are the most important tools to achieve this objective. How can that goal be achieved?

Media education as well as media and information literacy play an important role in recognizing fake news, fake media and hate speech including hoaxes, bias and pseudoscience. Because an increasing proportion of fake news is distributed via social media, media education has to concentrate more on the internet, and fake news spread there. Current media education has focused clearly on library collections, especially on printed material and the contents of different databases. Also the principles of fact checking and the tools we have for it should become familiar to public. Library can and must promote this.

The role of libraries in promoting equality and multiculturalism is important. Furthermore promoting democracy and tolerance is equally significant in the role. Media literacy,

including the capacity to recognize false media content is a civic competence, and libraries play a key role in promoting it.

Conclusion

In the future, the focus should be on mapping and developing the media and information literacy skills of library employees and customers in public libraries. The role of libraries in combatting false information is natural. Promoting source criticism and making reliable information available is a key task. However, it should be remembered that a library must not become a sensor. It has to accept different opinions, but if you are guilty of hate speech or deliberate dissemination of disinformation, which may even be harmful to an individual, a library should draw a line there. Deliberate dissemination of distorted information is not the task of a library.

Conflict of Interests

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

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