

Know News: Libraries as Community Anchors Engaging with Mis- and Disinformation

Headed by a Principal Investigator (Laura Saunders of Simmons College) and two Co-PIs (Lisa Hinchliffe and Rachel Gans Boriskin) from the fields of library science and journalism, this grant will bring together researchers and practitioners from LIS and related fields to study the impact of and responses to mis- and disinformation. The requested amount of \$68,630 will support a 1 ½ day symposium of 50 stakeholders across various disciplines to discuss professional responses to the threat of disinformation.

Current Significance & Strategic Collaboration

Identified as global threats (Howell, 2013), disinformation describes false or misleading information knowingly shared while misinformation is unintentionally inaccurate. This proposal uses disinformation as the umbrella term. Editorial processes such as fact-checking and peer review are meant to limit the spread of disinformation, but do not always work. Social media adds complications by bypassing traditional editorial processes and employing algorithms that might facilitate the spread of disinformation. Research shows that people have difficulty evaluating information (Stanford History Education Group, 2016), and exposure to disinformation can impact people in long-lasting and detrimental ways through the continued influence effect (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Swire, & Chang) and confirmation bias (Heshmat, 2015).

Concerns about disinformation and “fake news” are not new, but have been highlighted since the 2016 US election. The renewed focus on disinformation offers an opportunity to rethink approaches to information literacy and the relationship between information and media literacy-- a link identified by UNESCO, but not fully actualized in library practice. As community centers staffed by professionals, libraries and archives can act as community anchors to facilitate both access to information and the development of information literacy skills. Further, librarians can engage with professionals from other fields impacted by these issues including: Journalists struggling with a gatekeeping role who must strike a balance between providing access to all points of view and maintaining objectivity while not propagating false information; social media companies whose platforms and algorithms might help spread disinformation; and educators trying to teaching information and media literacy competencies. Indeed journalists and educators were identified as “natural allies” to librarians in combating disinformation (Banks, 2016). All of these professional can act as community anchors and while all are involved in relevant work, they are often siloed and not actively sharing information or partnering on projects. As a result, projects are largely local, disconnected from potential partners, and of limited impact. This project will allow stakeholders across these fields and disciplines to come together to discuss common challenges and identify shared solutions. Sharing information and ideas across fields and disciplines can lead to richer outcomes, make more efficient use of funding, and lead to greater impact as each field has a core audience that it tends to reach.

Project Design: Demonstrated Expertise

This grant will be used for a 1½ day symposium of up to 50 stakeholders to consider the role of librarians and related professionals as community anchors with Roberta Schaffer of the Library of Congress as facilitator. The symposium will include expert panel sessions, facilitated brainstorming, debate, and workshops. Participants will: identify existing information and media literacy projects and brainstorm ideas for new projects with focus on interdisciplinary partnerships; develop outcomes for an interdisciplinary curriculum that could be piloted at the PIs’ campuses and serve as a model for developing related programs; identify ways in which the conceptual link between media and information literacy can be actualized in practice. The symposium sessions will consider both the services/resources professionals provide to citizens, but also the ethical roles and responsibilities of these professionals. Guiding questions will include: what roles and responsibilities do librarians and other professionals have in collecting, curating, providing access to and helping to interpret this information; what is the appropriate balance between access and gatekeeping; how do we leverage digital technologies in this effort? How can each discipline and field leverage its strengths and bring its expertise to bear on common projects that could reach a wider and more diverse audience?

Participants will make recommendations on the role of libraries and other relevant professions in combating the influences of disinformation, specifying ways in which libraries can act as a hub for professionals across the disciplines to partner in the promotion of information and media literacy. The sessions will spur ideas for projects in line with IMLS’ request for “new, replicable, and responsive library programming models and tools that engage communities and provide learning experiences for patrons” and action steps for implementing ideas. Specific outcomes would include: a white paper of recommendations; identification of

curricular or co-curricular interdisciplinary activities to be used in various settings (public libraries, K12 schools, colleges and universities) to develop information/media literacy skills; a set of outcomes for programs and professional associations to develop interdisciplinary curricula and continuing education to prepare current and future professionals to implement information/media literacy programs; identifying technologies/tech projects to facilitate access and discovery of reliable information; and a research agenda for further study. Resultant ideas could be a basis for additional grants from IMLS, Knight, etc. PIs will work with an advisory board to focus the program and select participants. Potential participants could include representatives from the Pew Research Center (Internet & American Life Project, Journalism Project); Snopes.com; Facebook; Propublica.org; the Knight Foundation; as well as scholars, researchers, and practitioners from library science, journalism, and education.

National Impact and Implications for Diversity

Issues of disinformation have social justice implications as people's access to information and the technology through which it is disseminated is impacted by socio-economic status, race, age, education, and disability status (Anderson & Perrin, 2016). Challenges cut across all library settings, thus outcomes of this symposium would be relevant to all of those settings. The value of this project lies in its interdisciplinary nature: bringing these related fields together will allow for synergies and partnerships, help integrate media and information literacies in practical ways, and allow for maximizing financial resources in this time of limited funding. The cross-disciplinary and cross-community partnerships developed here to position libraries to promote information and media literacy education align well with the community anchor goals identified in the IMLS grant description as well as with IMLS strategic goals of learning, community, content, and access. It will also allow the participants to explore ways to better integrate information literacy with media/news literacy. While the crossover between the two literacies might seem apparent, and the two have been linked at least in theory, they are still often approached separately in practice.

Budget:

The estimated budget for this planning project is \$68,630. The proposed budget will support personnel (co-PI summer stipends and student assistant plus fringe benefits-\$6,588), travel and accommodations for the symposium facilitator, 1 co-PI, and 50 participants (\$52,800), function expenses for the symposium (\$4,000), honorarium for the facilitator (\$1,400), materials and supplies (\$250), and indirect costs at the College's negotiated rate of 58.7% of salaries and wages (\$3,592).

References

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