FIGHTING *"FAKE NEWS"*

HOW WE OVERHAULED OUR WEBSITE EVALUATION LESSONS

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Fake news has evolved from a "self-explanatory-compound noun" (Merriam-Webster 2018) into a political buzzword used as a catchall to describe almost any information, depending on who is making the accusation about fake news. The fake news concept is not new, but the phrase has seen a lot of action since the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Unfortunately, fake news is still a huge problem, and it's not going away on its own (Wineberg and McKevers 2016). According to a report from Stanford University, approximately 80 percent of students participating in the study struggled to evaluate the credibility of an online resource (SHEG 2018). This finding is more than a little disheartening, since media literacy is a huge part of what we teach as school librarians, and it appears we have not been very effective.

Given the recent surge of fake news and the disappointing results of the Stanford study, we were inspired by the new *AASL Standards Framework for Learners* (2017) to overhaul our website evaluation lessons in our middle school library program. Concentrating on the Shared Foundations Inquire, Curate, and Engage—and their Key Commitments—we updated, created, and located new teaching resources, enabling us to build lessons about detecting fake news that were more comprehensive than lessons used in the past. The overhaul process continues to evolve, encouraging learners' (and our own) sustained inquiry and critical thinking when analyzing information in the context of personal growth and research.

We began by updating our perspective on the phrase "fake news." Having seen the phrase co-opted to sell t-shirts (Trendy Tees 2018) and jeans (Logan 2018), "fake news" almost feels a little too hollow to use in lessons. Adding to that concern is the recent weaponizing of the phrase. Students can watch television or go online and see adults arguing, accusing different news outlets, reporters, and politicians of propagating fake news. We didn't want our students to see us as just more adults jumping into the fake news fray.

According to the article "Teaching and Learning in a Post-Truth World" (Hobbs 2017), students need to understand the specific traits of deceptive information by learning about concepts like propaganda, click-bait, hoax, sponsored content, etc. Instead of teaching another lesson about fake news, we have opted to focus on specific elements most likely found within unreliable sources—that is, in fake news. Although we do not completely avoid saying "fake news" (it is, after all, a culturally relevant term), we do emphasize understanding where we get our information is bigger than simply learning about the phrase "fake news."

Transforming website evaluation lessons into media literacy lessons widened our scope to include content such as memes, online comments, links posted on social media, and native advertising, as well as traditional evaluation of websites. This expansion supports AASL Competency IV.B.1: "Learners gather information appropriate to the task by seeking a variety of sources" (2017). Because false information or fake news may be present in a variety of formats easily accessible by students who are more likely to use the Internet than any more-traditional source to get the majority of their information (Gasser et al. 2012), it is important to address standard IV.B.3, which calls for learners to question and assess the validity and accuracy of information as they collect information representing diverse perspectives, demonstrating competency IV.B.2 (AASL 2017).

The meme format continues to be popular for sharing information. Facebook's struggle with fact checking and election interference shows how easily memes can spread propaganda (Brown 2018). Based on standard VI.A.3 ("Learners follow ethical and legal guidelines for gathering and using information by evaluating information for accuracy, validity, social and cultural context, and appropriateness for need"), we showed students memes and asked them to find evidence supporting the meme's message, refuting it, or a mix of both. We then switched roles, asking students to show us memes from their feed for us to evaluate for accuracy. Finally, we displayed our own memes created using a meme generator, showing how easy it is to create and spread content online. This last step also fits with standards VI.B.1–3 and VI.C.1 that deal with ethical use of information and intellectual property (AASL 2017).

Another addition to our information evaluation program relies on resources accessible through the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), members of which researched students' ability to evaluate online content. Unfortunately, the study shows major problems with how students assess information, noting learners' devotion to graphs and statistics as indicators of facts or evidence and students' inability to find and critically assess who or what is responsible for specific content online (McGrew et al. 2017). We started using worksheets from the Stanford study to assess our students' online skills to see if there was an area that stood out as especially problematic. At <https://sheg.stanford.edu/civic-online-reasoning> SHEG currently offers a fairly comprehensive range of free online assessments we use as bell-ringers, activities within lessons, and jumping-off points for class discussions.

NO UNIVERSAL FORMULA OR CHECKLIST CAN REPLACE *CRITICAL THINKING…*

We have also begun experimenting with different website/information evaluation methods. No universal formula or checklist can replace the critical thinking needed to determine if information is credible, but checklists and formulas can be a starting point for many students. We gave students the Common Sense Media Website test as an example, and guidelines from NPR, the Meriam Library's CRAAP test, and links to FactCheck.org stories (see list of resources), and then asked students to create their own checklists based on what they thought might work. Through this experiment students found that reading an About Me page can be pointless without further research and that verifying the credibility of a source can take longer than actually reading the information. In the article "The Challenge That's Bigger Than Fake News" McGrew et al. suggest that relying on traditional checklists "underestimates just how sophisticated the web has become" (2017).

Not everyone feels comfortable with this, but we decided to gently explore and introduce some political content while teaching fake news (Rosenzweig 2017). This enables us to support standards II.C.1–2, which address informed conversation and recognizing multiple viewpoints on a topic by reinforcing a respectful learning culture and positive discourse while discussing real-world topics (AASL 2017). Some of the political ideas really hit home with students when they find out the truth is actually the opposite of information they have seen or heard—and may have previously believed.

As of this writing (early summer), our program is evolving again to incorporate games. We started with an online game, Factitious (Watson 2017), that showed us how much students are motivated by games and competition. Since students responded positively to the game, we've had classes create games for other classes using game show formats; now we're working on a fake news BreakoutEDU game we plan to roll out this fall. Our goal is to keep our media literacy lessons fresh and relevant and to provide several options for delivery, su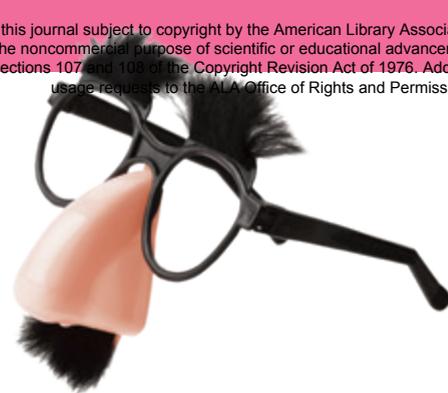ch as discussion, analyzing Web content, and games. If we present our students with outdated examples, they are not going to believe we know what we are talking about, and they will stop listening to us.

School librarians should be almost the first line of defense against the spread of fake news, but regardless of how many innovative lessons we teach on defining and detecting

fake news, without critical thinking skills and the motivation to use the skills, students' difficulties detecting fake news are likely to continue. Critical thinking is promoted throughout the AASL Standards. Certainly, I.D.3 ("Learners participate in an ongoing inquiry-based process by enacting new understanding through real-world connections") and I.D.4 ("Learners partici-pate in an ongoing inquiry-based process by using reflection to guide informed decisions") (AASL 2017) are the motivation and critical thinking components present in almost everything we teach in the school library, including how to detect fake news.

Fake news has always been around, but now it feels more complex and threatening to society. Teaching how to navigate fake news not only supports research skills, critical thinking, and personal growth, it might also be a factor in the condition of our society as our students age into voting decision makers. Despite the fast pace of social media and online culture (Snapchat, Instagram, ubiquitous emojis), we can teach students to value their own opinions, and invest time and effort into forming them. Teaching media literacy is how we can fight fake news and how school librarians create lifelong learners.

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Resources Mentioned:

Annenberg Public Policy Center: FactCheck.org <www.factcheck.org>

California State University, Chico, Meriam Library: "Evaluating Information – Applying the CRAAP Test" <www.csuchico.edu/lins/handouts/eval_websites.pdf>

Common Sense Education: "Identifying High-Quality Sites (6–8)" <www.commonsense.org/education/lesson/identifying-high-quality-sites-6-8>

NPR: "Fake or Real? How to Self-Check the News and Get the Facts" <www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/05/503581220/fake-or-real-how-to-self-check-the-news-and-get-the-facts>