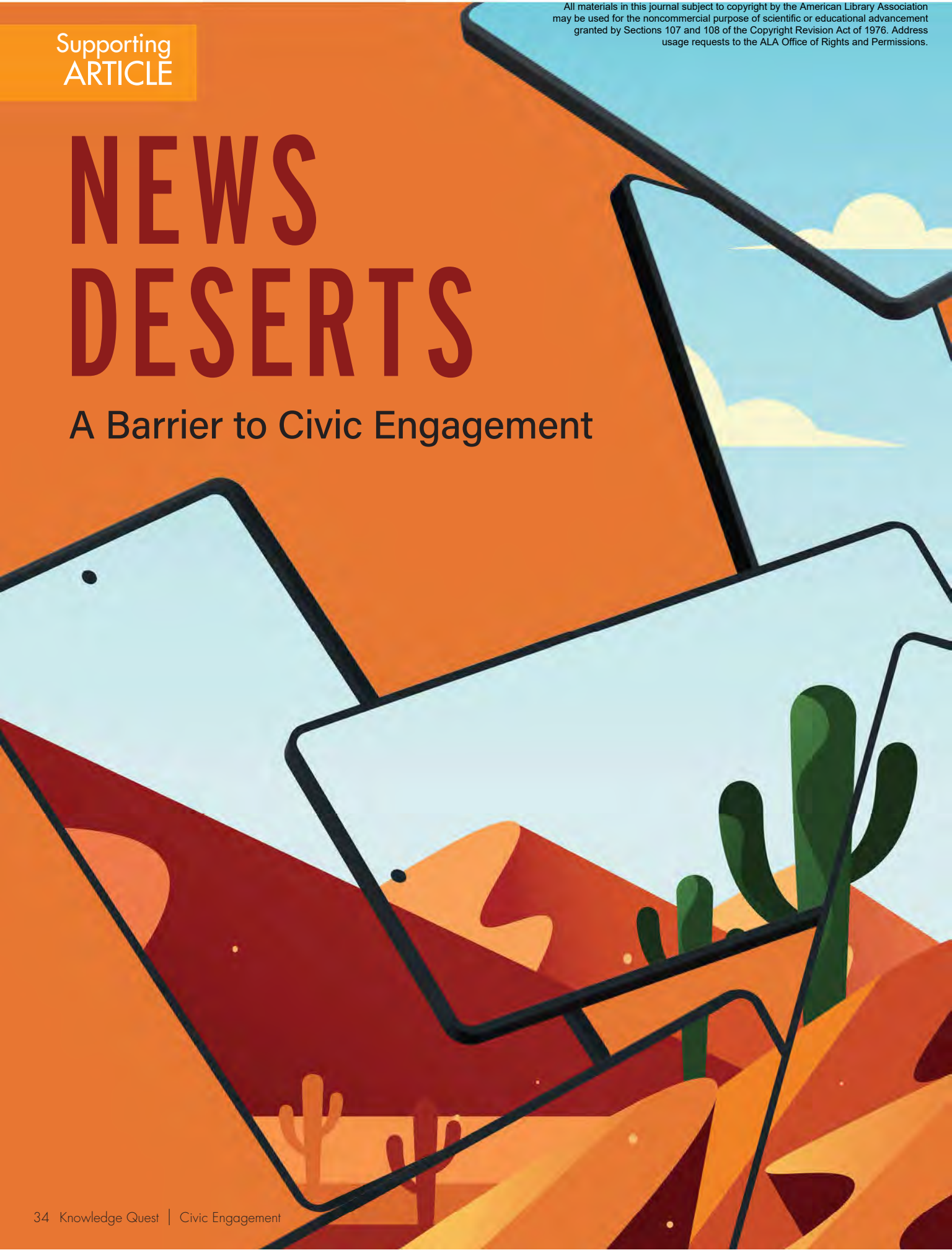
Supporting ARTICLE

NEWS DESERTS

A Barrier to Civic Engagement



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As librarians, the term *book deserts* is a familiar one, referring to pockets within our communities where access to books is impeded by any number of obstacles. Familiar, too, are the devastating effects of book deserts on our readers, some of whom may come to us having never held, never mind *owned*, a book. These learners enter school at a disadvantage compared to those with abundant access to books (Zuri 2022). Less familiar, however, maybe the term *news deserts*, even though their effects on our communities are just as profound.

A 2020 study from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Hussman School of Journalism and Media found that since 2004 over one-quarter of U.S. newspapers have disappeared. This reduction has left many people, especially those in poor rural areas, living in news deserts, where access to professionally vetted information is limited, if not completely absent (Stites 2020). Additionally, those newsrooms that do still exist employ far fewer people. The Pew Research Center found that newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers has dropped by nearly half since 2008, resulting in a staggering 62 percent drop in ad revenue during the same time period (Walker 2021). Other traditional news platforms, such as cable news, haven't fared much better in an environment in which subscription models are dead and clicks are the new currency (Rothschild and Fischer 2022). The voids left by traditional news sources don't remain empty, however. Instead of information vacuums, news deserts are flooded with mis-, dis-, and mal-information—all of which make true civic engagement impossible. Civic engagement depends on an informed citizenry whose decisions are based on facts. News deserts are more than just barriers to those facts; they stand between our communities and the information that makes healthy civic engagement possible.

The answer to where our communities are getting information in the absence of traditional news sources is no mystery. In an age where we've collectively decided that information should be free, social media has emerged as a primary source for content, including news (Hutchinson 2021). However, while social media platforms have become our go-to for everything from recipe ideas to current events, the platforms young people turn to for content are often very different from those their teachers and parents are most familiar with. Recently, the Pew Research Center shared new data about social media use among Americans that revealed stark, if not shocking, gaps between the platforms used most by adults versus those our learners prefer. One of the most glaring examples of this divide exists among users of TikTok. While less than 20 percent of adults (ages 21+) said they used TikTok regularly, 67 percent of teens (ages 13–17) use it consistently, with a stunning 81 percent of Black teens saying they preferred the app (Vogels et al. 2022). These findings, coupled with a recent viral Twitter thread about the use of TikTok as a research tool (Sheares 2022), left many school librarians in our social media feeds concerned.

Those worries aren't without merit. In addition to concerns about the accuracy of information found on social media, there's also reason to be wary of radicalization in spaces where the algorithms have been proven to amplify hate. In 2021 an investigation by Media Matters found that if TikTok users interact with transphobic content, the app's algorithm will not only populate their For You Page (FYP) with more transphobic videos, but it will also curate a playlist of suggested videos that contains White-supremacist, antisemitic, and far-right content that includes calls for violence. In their investigation, researchers from Media Matters created a

dummy account, interacted with anti-trans content, and then evaluated the first 400 videos curated in the account's FYP. The study concluded that "while nearly 400 may sound like a large number of videos, if a user watches videos for an average of 20 seconds each, they could consume 400 videos in just over two hours. A user could download the app at breakfast and be fed overtly White supremacist and neo-Nazi content before lunch" (Keith 2021).

Unfortunately, TikTok isn't the only social media platform that has struggled to control the spread of mis-, dis-, and mal-information. Both Facebook and Twitter have had to reckon with revelations about how the spread of false content outpaces verifiable content on their platforms (Dwoskin 2021). That said, while it's tempting to advise learners (both young and old) to stay away from social media as a source of information, this approach can have negative consequences as well. When we dismiss the search tools young people prefer, we send the message that those tools aren't worthy of scrutiny. By teaching them only how to evaluate information from the sources we prefer, we leave them fundamentally unprepared to spot and avoid potentially harmful content outside of school librarian-vetted environments. Further, given that these platforms are (for better or worse) the places where we engage with our elected officials, and form opinions about our own governance, helping learners evaluate information in these spaces has become an essential way we prepare them to participate in our democracy.

Ironically, one consequence of news deserts is a flood of mis-, dis-, and mal-information that traditional information literacy approaches are not equipped to address. As school librarians, information evaluation has always been in our wheelhouse, but today's information challenges require new approaches. Instead of throwing up our hands and imploring our students to use the databases we subscribe to, we must meet them where they are. Here are some ideas for getting started.

Get to Know TikTok for Yourself

While trending apps change frequently, having a passing understanding of the spaces where our kids spend much of their online time can help us better address the draw of these platforms and the information needs they create for kids. That said, you don't need to create an account and start busting out trending dance moves to familiarize yourself with TikTok. TikTok videos can be viewed in Web browsers without downloading the app. If you're not sure where to get started, try the hashtag #booktok where users share book recommendations. The #booktok community is large and active, and is using its collective voice to influence publishing. Take Adam Silvera's YA novel *They Both Die at the End* (Quill Tree 2018). It has spent over a year on the *New York Times* Young Adult Best Sellers list more than four years after its original publication, thanks to a surge of over 37 million #booktok videos recommending it (Murray 2021). But if #booktok isn't your thing, try #librarytok instead. High school librarian Kelsey Bogan has curated a Padlet full of librarians who use TikTok to share ideas and advocate for readers (2022). These videos can help you get to know both the platform and some of your colleagues.

Teach Students about How Algorithms and Engagement Work

We tend to think of "the socials" in the context of ways that we use them, but in reality the mission of social media platforms isn't to provide us with spaces to share pictures of our lunch, connect with old friends, get into political arguments, or influence book sales. Rather, social media platforms are designed to do one thing, and one thing only: get us to engage with content to make money for the companies who own the platforms. To do that, they collect massive amounts of data about us and constantly tweak their algorithms to get us to like, share, comment, and follow. For platforms like TikTok, user engagement is the primary data point used to curate future suggested content (TikTok 2020). While the example earlier about how searching for harmful content can result in a flood of potentially radicalizing videos is certainly a cautionary tale, it also represents an opportunity. Teaching kids how algorithms work and how to be intentional about feeding the algorithm data that will lead to good/healthy search results is now an essential information literacy skill.

Add Prebunking to Your Toolkit

Derived from debunking, *prebunking* refers to the practice of preemptively identifying and dismissing harmful content through the recognition of expected mis-, dis-, and mal- information techniques. Even the most motivated among us don't have time to fact-check every suspicious claim online, and certainly many of our students aren't motivated to do that work beyond the scope of an assignment or project. With that in mind,

prebunking is a way to inoculate learners against harmful content in advance by teaching them how to avoid information that contains specific red flags.

Here's how prebunking can work. In a recent study conducted by Cambridge University, millions of YouTube users watched 90-second clips that explained common disinformation techniques, like fear-mongering, scapegoating, and playing into emotions. Compared to a control group, users who were repeatedly exposed to information about techniques used to manipulate and fool the public were better able to recognize those techniques later. Upon recognition of those tactics, users chose to avoid potentially harmful content (Smalley 2022). For school librarians one way to incorporate prebunking into our information literacy work is to make sure all research projects contain a mini-lesson on commonly used dis- and mal- information techniques. The more we remind kids of the tools and tactics used by those who create harmful content, the more likely learners are to recognize—and avoid—it when we are not there to help them.

Teach Skills That Apply to Any Platform

Technology changes. But human behavior is remarkably predictable. By the time we all get a handle on TikTok, our kids will have moved onto the next big thing. Instead of focusing on learning everything about how a specific app works, focus on skills that transcend platforms. For example, helping kids understand how individuals who create and share mis-, dis-, and mal-information rely on emotional triggers as a way to increase engagement can prepare learners for navigating those reactions to content regardless of the platform they use to find information. A 2018 study from Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that "content that arouses strong emotions spreads further, faster, more deeply, and more broadly online" (Meyer 2018). Peppering headlines, bylines, sidebars, news chyrons, and even photo captions with words that elicit an extreme emotional response and/or confirm existing biases helps to increase the likelihood that a story, video, or post will be clicked, liked, and shared. When we connect with news that triggers an extreme emotion like fear, anger, or outrage, our immediate urge is to express that emotion—often by passing on the information (along with our feelings about it) to others (LaGarde and Hudgins 2021). Helping kids recognize when content triggers them can help learners avoid mis-, dis-, and mal- information on whatever platform they prefer.

Go Mobile

While we tend to use desktop and laptop computers to teach information literacy at school, these are not the devices our young people use to access information everywhere else (Vogels et al. 2022). This reality matters for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that information looks vastly different on a mobile device than it does on a desktop or laptop, making the steps we often encourage kids to take when learning more about content or its source equally disparate. Including mobile environments in our information literacy work is an essential part of preparing young people to evaluate content outside the context of an assignment (LaGarde and Hudgins 2020). Whether creating mobile

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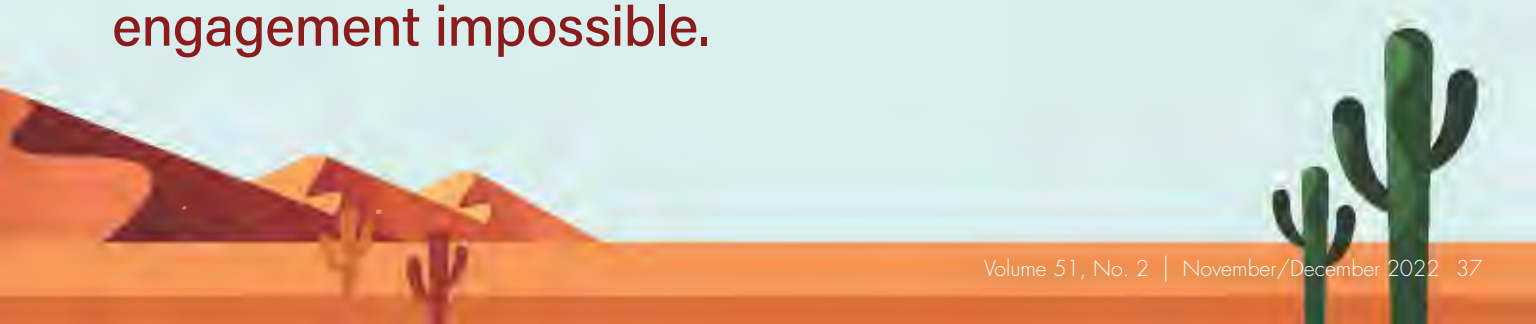

simulations, displaying your phone under a document camera, or using a school-issued cart of iPads, including mobile devices when teaching kids to think like fact-checkers helps them recognize that these skills apply to the research they do outside of school, too.

Look for Helpers

In the age of apps like TikTok, information literacy instruction needs a radical overhaul. In an ideal world, these skills would be taught across curricula and grade spans and in meaningful ways throughout a young person's K–12 education. Until that becomes a reality, school librarians, who work with every learner in the school, remain best positioned to fill the gap. But we can't do it alone. The urgent need to help today's learners navigate a rapidly changing, commercially driven information landscape presents an opportunity for collaboration. Look for teachers in your building who are open to trying something new. While social studies and science are obvious choices, as propaganda and data analysis are already part of the content standards for those subjects, consider some less-conspicuous collaborators, too. Health teachers, for example, may be open to a unit on dis-information related to vitamins and supplements, while art teachers may be keen to collaborate on a unit that teaches kids how images can be manipulated to further an agenda. The more partners we have in this work, the more likely we'll be able to create sticky learning opportunities for kids.

Remember, Some of Your Colleagues May Need Support, Too

While, ultimately, our goal is to help strengthen our students' information literacy skills, it may be necessary first to help teachers hone their skills. Sharing your learning is one way to support your colleagues as both information consumers and potential mentors for kids. Another idea might be to lead a staff-wide book study to increase collective understanding of information literacy. While we humbly suggest our book, *Developing Digital Detectives* (ISTE 2021) as a potential resource, numerous other titles out there may be of interest to your staff.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the body of research into the effects of book deserts on the academic and personal development of the young people we serve is well established (Langs 2022), we are just beginning to understand the effects of news deserts on our communities. And yet, we feel those effects with increasing frequency and ferocity. We would argue that the growing adversarial relationship between schools and some parents, leading to an exponential increase in both aggressive behavior at school board meetings (Harris 2022) and an uptick in challenges to instructional materials (Yorio 2022) is the result of mis-, dis-, and mal-information amplified by social media. As news outlets struggle to survive in a world that doesn't value or trust their products, we find ourselves in a situation in which information is plentiful, but facts are more difficult to find. As school librarians, this reality presents challenges and opportunities. In the end, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for the information landscape they actually live in, as opposed to the one we wish they did.

Jennifer LaGarde *is a lifelong teacher and learner with over 20 years in public education. Her educational passions include leveraging technology to help students develop authentic reading lives, meeting the unique needs of students living in poverty, and helping learners (of all ages) discern fact from fiction in the information they consume. With Darren Hudgins, Jennifer is the coauthor of the books* Fact vs. Fiction: Teaching Critical Thinking in the Age of Fake News *(ISTE 2018) and* Developing Digital Detectives *(ISTE 2021). Subscribe to their free monthly information literacy newsletter at <https://drkenbortphd.substack.com>. A huge fan of YA literature, she currently lives, works, reads, and drinks lots of coffee in Olympia, Washington. Follow her adventures at <www.librarygirl.net> or on Twitter @ jenniferlagarde.*

Darren Hudgins *is a passionate advocate for creating learning experiences that drive educators of all kinds and their students to think, do, and thrive. He believes in this mission so much that he conceptualized and currently directs Think | Do | Thrive, LLC <thinkdothrive.org>. Here he uses his 20+ years in education, edtech, and coaching to inspire critical thinking, champion active learning, and create opportunities for educational communities to improve. With Jennifer LaGarde, he is coauthor of* Fact vs. Fiction: Teaching Critical Thinking in the Age of Fake News *(ISTE 2018) and* Developing Digital Detectives *(ISTE 2021). He challenges us: "Let's untangle this world together."*

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