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Fighting Fake News: Tools and Resources to Combat Disinformation

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It seems as though the “truth” is both everywhere you look and impossible to find. From news to magazines—and even advertisements—we are constantly bombarded with information that forces us to repeatedly ask ourselves: “Is it real, or is it fake?” The prevalence and widespread availability of (dis)information is not a new phenomenon. Back in the golden age of mix tapes, in the 1970s and 1980s, the media supply company Memorex had a slogan that asked, “Is it live, or is it Memorex?” The company proposed that its audio recordings were so crisp and clear, that one could not tell the difference between a recording and a live performance (Computer History Museum 2005). Just like the audio in that Memorex commercial, sometimes it is difficult to discern real news from fake.

Distinguishing between real and fake information is a complex process that requires a nuanced approach to the idea of objective truth, particularly in our current political climate. For every event, there are multiple interpretations all presented as the “truth,” but each is merely a version of the truth colored by the inherent biases of the person telling the story. It is challenging for adults to sort through the data and find the “real” story—and even more so for adolescents.

The ground-breaking 2016 Stanford University study assessing news literacy in youth (Wineburg et al. 2016) showed that students need more support and practice developing the critical-thinking skills needed to navigate

the digital landscape. In the study, thousands of students from middle school through college were asked to complete a series of tasks, including comparing and contrasting posts from the comments section of a newspaper, differentiating between fake and authentic social media accounts, verifying controversial claims, and assessing the credibility of websites in an open search. The results were disappointing, though not a complete surprise, particularly to those of us who work with this population of students regularly. Although this particular age group of young people may appear able to navigate the digital world with an ease and fluency that can only come from early exposure to technology, in reality, students are often much less skilled at evaluating the accuracy of the information they find. The study indicated that less than 20 percent of middle school students could distinguish between ads and reality, concluding that the future outlook for our society was bleak, at best.

At this critical juncture, school librarians are poised to prove their immeasurable value and worth as educators once again. As a profession, librarians are particularly well qualified to fill this need for students by helping them discern fact from fiction, truth from misrepresentation. Students and staff are looking to school librarians more and more for tools and resources to discern the accuracy and validity of news and information. As such, the theme of this issue of *Knowledge Quest* is the tools and resources needed to combat fake news. Although many

scholars and educators have previously addressed the concept of fake news, particularly in the context of social media and youth, this issue focuses more specifically on the ways in which school librarians can enact change by embracing their role as leaders in the development of multiple literacy skills that students need to critically evaluate information.

In "Heuristics: An Approach to Evaluating News Obtained through Social Media," Ann Ewbank, associate professor at Montana State University, and Spencer Johnson, a recent doctoral graduate from Montana State University, describe how heuristics, or "rules of thumb," may be used to quickly evaluate news obtained through social media. They promote the role of the school librarian in providing professional development to teachers in order to integrate these skills into the curriculum.

Hannah Byrd Little, director of the Webb School Library and Archives, teams up with journalism professor Dr. Robert Byrd in "Media Literacy: A Moving Target" to discuss ways to critically read news and spot quality responsible journalism, regardless of the format. They posit that, with ever-changing technologies and the prevalence of news delivered through social media, news media literacy can seem like a moving target. They offer practical techniques and strategies to encourage everyone to become more discerning consumers of information.

In her article "There's So Much There! Helping Kids Conquer the Internet and Save Democracy," high school librarian and author Angie Miller explores how school librarians can help students become more confident researchers by modeling the search process and providing them with exemplars and approaches they can use independently. Taking a practical approach based on her own experiences, Angie provides useful strategies and resources that can make researching a less confusing activity for students.

Mica Johnson, a middle school librarian in Tennessee, shares how she utilized the Shared Foundations and Key Commitments from AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* to revamp her website evaluation lessons to build more-comprehensive fake news lessons for students. Mica provides a blueprint for other librarians and educators interested in creating a more rigorous and exciting approach to dealing with the flood of questionable information that students face.

Fake news is not an issue that is going to disappear anytime soon. Librarians have long combatted misinformation and disinformation; at times they may have felt like the only discerning voice in the storm of multiple truths. Unlike the "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" question, the "Is it real, or is it fake?" question is not as easily answered. As school librarians continue to embrace their role as leaders in their schools and districts, users of information will continue to rely on them as a critical resource in their quest for truth.

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