



June 2018

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### Recommended Citation

Courtney, Isabelle (2018) "In an Era of Fake News, Information Literacy Has a Role to Play in Journalism Education in Ireland," *Irish Communication Review*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 3.

doi:10.21427/D73X6Q

Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/icr/vol16/iss1/3>

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# In an era of fake news, information literacy has a role to play in journalism education in Ireland

Isabelle Courtney

## **Abstract**

Framed by the problem of fake news and misinformation, a recent study into journalism education in Ireland focused on the overlaps that exist between two professions: journalism and librarianship. The emerging literature on fake news is overwhelmingly coming from these two disciplines. Historically both have deep roots in truth and fact and employ a specific range of tools for the evaluation of information. Librarians use a framework called information literacy, while journalism educators speak of media literacy, fact-checking and verification of sources. With the many overlaps in media and information literacy, journalists and librarians would appear to be natural partners in the fight against fake news. This article looks at the current level of awareness of information literacy among journalism educators and establishes if there is scope for collaboration and development of a bespoke information literacy module in journalism, media and broadcasting courses.

## **Introduction**

Recent shifts in the media ecosystem and the decline in public trust of the media has shone a light on the need for enhanced media and information literacy skills. Since the Trump presidential campaign in the US and the Brexit campaign in the UK there has been concern regarding the rapid proliferation of fake news and misinformation, particularly through social media (Moore, 2017). A 2017 Reuters Institute report into digital news found that there is a sense, in some countries, that newsfeeds are being overwhelmed or polluted by different political agendas (Newman *et al.*, 2017).

With the overabundance of information available today there is an increasing need for verification and validation of news stories and sources. A study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group on online media literacy has been widely cited in response to concerns about fake news. This study found that students at all levels are underprepared to identify misleading information online and to effectively evaluate its trustworthiness (Stanford History Education Group, 2016).

Today undergraduates face a challenge: They can access more information on their mobile phone at a moment's notice than previous generations could access in a university library. However, much of the information digested by students today is of questionable quality. This reality makes knowing how to properly search for, use, and evaluate information a critical skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fosnacht, 2017). The ability to evaluate information is imperative for all individuals but is of particular importance to students studying to be media professionals, since these students will be the journalists of the future and will fill the roles of gatekeepers and arbitrators of civic discourse. In this era of fake news, it can be harder than ever for journalists to prove themselves objective and honest in their coverage of important news events where they can be met with not skepticism but outright rejection or denial. Journalists should be open to criticism for the stories they write but for news pieces to be dismissed as fake and lumped with the latest conspiracy theories shared on social media is a deeply troubling notion. Not all news pieces will be met with universal agreement but good reporting should inspire meaningful debate and tarring such pieces as fake news is undermining this notion (Farrell, 2017).

Many academic librarians agree that the current prominence of fake news in the public conversation has presented librarians with the opportunity and responsibility to assume a leadership role as trained information professionals in providing relevant information literacy instruction to students and to develop collaborative partnerships with the teaching faculty across the disciplines.

In an effort to establish if information literacy has a role to play in journalism education, a recent Irish study investigated the interactions between journalism educators and academic librarians. It looked at the overlaps in both professions and the level of awareness of information literacy among journalism and media faculties.

A qualitative study was employed whereby face to face interviews were conducted with practitioners from both disciplines of librarianship and journalism education across six Irish educational institutions who offer level-8 BA journalism or media and communication courses. Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews, using a list of issues to explore.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review aims to provide a brief overview of research relating to the issue of fake news and the current discourses from the fields of librarianship and journalism. It further looks at the overlaps in information and media literacy and the correlation between the two professions.

Fake news is defined as the promotion and propagation of news articles via traditional and social media. These articles are promoted in such a way that they appear to be spread by other users, as opposed to being paid-for advertising. The news stories distributed are designed to influence or manipulate users' opinions on a certain topic towards certain objectives. The term *Fake News*, also referred to as *Misinformation* or *Alternative Facts* is most often used to describe completely fabricated stories, but can also be applied to a broader continuum of news (Gu and Yarochkin, 2017). Many news outlets will exhibit some form of explicit or implicit bias while not falling into the fake news category. Assessing the quality of the information source is crucial and it is up to every individual to evaluate the information and ensure that it is reliable and truthful. Eric Novotny, librarian at Penn State University libraries, divides fake news into seven categories:

**Fake News:** Sources that intentionally fabricate information, disseminate deceptive content, or grossly distort actual news reports.

**Satire:** Sources that use humour, irony, exaggeration, ridicule, and false information to comment on current events.

**Bias:** Sources that come from a particular point of view and may rely on propaganda, decontextualised information, and opinions distorted as facts.

**Rumour Mill:** Sources that traffic in rumours, gossip, innuendo, and unverified claims.

**State News:** Sources in repressive states operating under government sanction.

**Junk Science:** Sources that promote pseudoscience, metaphysics, naturalistic fallacies, and other scientifically dubious claims.

**Clickbait:** A strategically placed hyperlink designed to drive traffic to sources that provide generally credible content, but use exaggerated, misleading, or questionable headlines, social media descriptions, and/or images (Novotny, 2017).

### **Information literacy defined**

Information literacy is defined as, knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner (CILIP, 2013). Information literacy is concerned with what is “true”: what kinds of things we should believe, what kinds of things we shouldn’t, and how we can tell the difference. It is, therefore, the task of information literacy librarians to help students articulate and apply reliable criteria to answer questions such as, ‘Out of all the information that’s out there, what should I believe?’ or ‘How do I know?’ Similarly, information literacy, like philosophy, deals with some of the most fundamental human questions relating to truth and knowledge. Unlike philosophy, it does so in a practical way. Information literacy aims to give students criteria to apply so they can figure out what types of information they should use to construct their beliefs about the world (Klipfel, 2014).

The idea of Information literacy has its roots in librarianship. Although evident in the literature since the 1970s, the concept of ‘information literacy’ gained real traction in the 1990s with the advent of mass usage of the internet. Suddenly information was a few effortless clicks away rather than residing in hardcopy books in a physical space. Accessing this information and using it correctly constituted, for proponents of the concept, a new ‘literacy’. ‘Information literacy’ as a term was boosted greatly by a definition and model for developing the concept agreed upon by the American Libraries Association (ALA) in 1989. An ‘information literate person... recognises when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.’ Since the late 1980s/early 1990s information literacy developed to include an ethical dimension ‘knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner’ (Belshaw, 2009).

### **Media literacy versus information literacy**

While many academic librarians consider media literacy to be a subset of information literacy, Lee and So distinguish between both of these literacies: they argue that information literacy has a closer tie to library science, while media literacy is more related to media content, media industry, and social effects. Due to their different academic orientations, the two fields adopt different analytical approaches. Their research found that media literacy is not a subset of information literacy as some scholars have suggested, although the two fields have similarities and they share the same goal. Both could find common ground by cooperating together to contribute to the promotion of new literacy in knowledge societies (Lee and So, 2014).

While the information literacy territory is expanding, the lines are also blurring. There is a lot of different language used around information literacy but regardless of what it is labelled, ultimately, it is about empowerment of people so they know how to use information in future academic, personal and work life (Bruce, 2017).

Evaluation of information is a central skill of information literacy and is taught by librarians and journalism educators alike. Librarians use several evaluation techniques one of which is the CRAAP test. This test was developed by librarians at California State University, and is widely adopted by academic libraries. It suggests considering information using the categories of:

**Currency** (the timeliness of the information),

**Relevance** (the importance of the information for your needs),

**Authority** (the source of the information),

**Accuracy** (the reliability, truthfulness and correctness of the content),

and

**Purpose** (the reason the information exists).

Meanwhile, journalism professor and media literacy expert, John McManus, developed a similar information evaluation test called the SMELL test for journalism students:

**Source** (Who is providing the information?),

**Motivation** (Why are they telling me this?),

**Evidence** (What evidence is provided for generalizations?),

**Logic** (Do the facts logically compel the conclusions?) and

**Left out** (What's missing that might change our interpretation of the information?). (McManus, 2012).

### **The role of information literacy education in third level colleges**

Today's students interact and use information in radically different ways from the pre-internet generation. They are heavily engaged with a plethora of social networking tools. These students often display a high level of competence with information technology. They are becoming increasingly familiar with generating their own content through the use of blogs, wikis, YouTube and so on. Although their information technology skills are well developed, research has shown that this group – sometimes referred to as 'digital natives' – lack the information literacy skills and critical thinking skills needed to negotiate this complex information arena effectively (Barnes et al, 2007). The first port of call for most students when given an assignment is frequently a Google search (OCLC, 2010), but students rarely distinguish between free content available on the internet and the scholarly content to which the library subscribes, which is also delivered via the internet. Unless students have an awareness of the wide range of authoritative and scholarly sources available via the library, and understand the need to evaluate critically the information they find, their uninformed research may result in poor marks for their assignments and a negative learning experience. In contrast, students who have been introduced by librarians to the wide range of resources available via the library might have gained higher marks and demonstrated a deeper level of learning.

Librarians play a key role in helping students from all academic disciplines, exploit the quality information sources available via the library. At the same time, their lecturers also need to be able to support them in developing their information literacy skills. The rapid expansion of databases and other information sources available to the lecturing staff challenges their ability to keep up to date with new resources to use in support of their teaching. It is therefore necessary for librarians and academics to work together to ensure students engage with high-quality and authoritative sources in their learning, through structured information literacy activities. A starting point for librarians and academics working together is a shared understanding of information

literacy. Furthermore, in comparing three different strategies for IL training, **standalone**, where students are given a once off library instruction class; **integrated**, where library instruction class is given at the point of need; and **embedded** where information literacy is explicitly articulated as a core component at the programme design stage. It was found that the best strategy for teaching information literacy is an embedded model where IL is taught in the context of the course content (Fallon and Breen, 2012).

### **Overlaps in journalism and librarianship**

Undoubtedly, there are overarching themes within journalism and librarianship and there appears to be definite similarities between the current discourses regarding fake news. This solid connection between journalism education and information literacy was noted by Lampert in a 2004 study of discipline-based approaches to combating plagiarism in which she specifically examines journalism: The linkage between journalism and information literacy curricular needs is strong'. She adds: 'Like all disciplines that rely heavily on the synthesis of information garnered from research, the integrity of journalism and journalists is dependent on the ethical usage and dissemination of information' (quoted in Noe, 2015). It can be argued that due to advances in technology, both the library and journalism professions are undergoing profound transformations. Although both depend on, disseminate, and create information for a living, and provide it in multiple formats, journalism reports information to the public, whereas libraries facilitate public access to information. Newsrooms and libraries produce information essential to the healthy functioning of democracy. Ironically, the same social media that help them thrive also threatens them. The volume of information and the speed that it moves through social media is making facts harder to verify (Jones, 2011).

The recent proliferation of fake news has given rise to concern at a national and an international level. There have been calls for action to halt the spread of fake news and help the public better evaluate news sources. The newly formed European Commission's high level expert group has been established to advise the European Commission on all the issues in relation to the spread of misinformation across traditional and social media. As part of their commitment to combat fake news, Facebook announced it will now survey users on what



news sources they find trustworthy. In addition to this they will lessen the posts from publishers, businesses and celebrities, and put more emphasis on posts from friends and families of Facebook users (Arbel, 2017). Many organisations are looking to formulate and implement media literacy policies in order to improve critical thinking skills (Teravainen and Picton, 2017). One of the most recent media literacy initiatives to be undertaken in Ireland is that of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), which published its media literacy policy in late 2016. The policy arises from their obligations under the Broadcasting Act 2009 to foster, develop and undertake media literacy activities. As part of the policy, the BAI committed to the development of a media literacy network. The plan for implementation of the BAI's policy is at an early stage and they are currently working with a wide range of stakeholders nationally to formulate a strategy for rolling out the policy across the island of Ireland.

Although they are two separate fields, media literacy and information work towards the common goal of improving critical thinking skills and this is particularly true in relation to the issue of combating fake news ( Lee and So, 2014) (Koltay, 2011).

In August 2017 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), an international body representing the interests of library and information services, developed its infographic on how to spot fake news as a simple yet effective tool for librarians internationally to teach critical thinking to their users. This infographic has been translated into 37 languages, and has featured in newsletters, course-packs, and on international news channels (IFLA, 2017). The library at UCD has produced a comprehensive guide to fake news which is accessible via their website, in addition to this, the information literacy branch of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI) hosted a talk by academic librarian Alan Carbery on the role of IL in tackling the problem of fake news.

On examination of the literature from both disciplines, it can be deduced that many organisations and institutions are aware of the problem of fake news and have launched or are in the process of launching different frameworks and programmes to tackle the issue. However, despite the many similarities across journalism and librarianship and their approaches to teaching information and media literacy, no one clear information literacy framework for journalism and media students exists in Ireland today.

## Findings

In order to establish the benefits of a collaboration of educators and librarians this research looked at the level of awareness of the role of the librarian and the concept of information literacy (hereafter referred to as IL) within journalism faculties.

Overall it was found that there was a limited understanding of IL and the role of the librarian within journalism faculties. Many of the journalists were unaware that librarians were trained in teaching and some even had a limited understanding of IL. Journalists mainly considered the role of the librarian as one of procurers of books and databases.

information **literacy** as a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when **information** is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed **information**. (American Library Association)

Each of the journalism educators were asked about their understanding of IL; if they were not familiar with the term they were shown a definition and asked their opinion. The majority of the interviewees were not familiar with the term and pondered the definition.

Those who were aware of IL said that it was a term they would never use in the classroom but admitted that it seemed like a fundamental building block to finding good information.

One journalism educator gave his own interpretation of IL saying that fact-checking and skepticism was the basis of IL. Being literate is no longer about being able to read or write but it is the ability to find the truth. Contemplating the question, another interviewee noted that it was not only crucial for media students but for everyone to verify information and IL appeared to be a valuable framework in order to do that. Interestingly, one educator who was not familiar with the term felt that it had little to do with how he taught journalism.

In an effort to highlight the similarities between librarianship and journalism each of the interviewees were shown a list of the core principles of librarianship and a list of the core principles of journalism and asked for their comments.

| <b>Core principles of Librarianship</b> | <b>Core principles of Journalism</b> |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Access</b>                           | <b>Truth &amp; Accuracy</b>          |
| <b>Confidentiality/Privacy</b>          | <b>Independence</b>                  |
| <b>Democracy</b>                        | <b>Fairness and impartiality</b>     |
| <b>Diversity</b>                        | <b>Humanity</b>                      |
| <b>Educational/Lifelong Learning</b>    | <b>Accountability</b>                |
| <b>Intellectual freedom</b>             | <b>Democracy/Freedom of speech</b>   |
| <b>The public good</b>                  | <b>Data protection</b>               |
| <b>Preservation</b>                     | <b>The public interest</b>           |
| <b>Professionalism</b>                  | <b>Privacy/protection of sources</b> |
| <b>Social responsibility</b>            |                                      |
| (ALA-American Library Association)      | (EJN- Ethical Journalism Network)    |

Overall, when asked to compare each discipline’s core values, the correlations were met with surprise and most interviewees had not in the past considered the commonalities of both professions. On reflection, it was acknowledged that an alliance of journalists and librarians would be advantageous to students and civil society equally. It was also suggested that media organisations would benefit by employing librarians in the role of fact-checkers.

One journalist had not previously considered a link between the two disciplines and when he became aware of the core principles of librarianship he noted that reading the core principles of librarianship was like reading his media and journalism syllabus. Another pointed out that the structure of the ALA (American Library Association) core principles were similar to that of the SPJ (Society of

Professional Journalists in the US). Agreeing that there were a lot of overlaps, a key difference also existed: journalism frames a story whereas libraries do more of the filtering of information when they decide what to put in their collection. However, it was suggested by one interviewee that journalism and libraries occupy similar space particularly in the context of the evaluation information on the internet.

Overall there would appear to be a lack of understanding of IL and a distinct lack of awareness of the role a teaching librarian can play within journalism and media studies programmes. There was an underlying notion that journalism lecturers teach critical thinking skills as part of the journalism programmes and have done so for many years and saw little need to involve librarians. They do not use the term information literacy but make reference to terms such as 'fact-checking', 'verification', 'media and digital literacy skills' which is consistent with Bruce's assertions that there are many different terms used for IL, as mentioned in the literature review. It was suggested by one librarian that another reason for the poor interaction was possibly down to the fact that librarians are not good at self-promotion: she stated that librarians were notorious for gathering in a room and telling each other they were great, but unfortunately that message was not transferring across to the faculties.

One journalism educator said that verification and fact-checking was taught fairly well within the course content and they had not ever considered using the library teaching service; after all, journalism courses had adequately covered verification and fact-checking for a hundred years and there was no need for change.

It is interesting to note that the journalism educators who did interact with the library, and encouraged their students to use the library, tended to use the library for services such as retrieval of textbooks and access to databases and were not aware of the IL or teaching aspect of librarianship. The importance of the library was impressed on the students by all the programme lecturers but in reality most students don't interact until they have to, which is usually in the final year when a dissertation is required.

When discussing the lack of faculty interaction with the library, one journalism educator posed a noteworthy question, suggesting that journalists by their nature perhaps had a sense of superiority when it came to asking librarians to

provide IL instruction. In concurrence with this journalist one of the librarians who was interviewed said that interaction is poor with the faculty because journalists feel that they teach their own IL skills but refer to them as 'media literacy' or 'digital literacy'. This librarian further explained that many journalism students can reach fourth year without having any awareness of what the library has to offer them in terms of research skills. This problem stemmed from the lack of interaction between faculty and the library and the difficulty in securing meetings between both.

Generally, when asked to compare each other's core values, both librarians and journalists were surprised at the correlations and most had not, in the past considered the commonalities of both professions. On reflection, both disciplines acknowledged that an alliance of journalists and librarians would be particularly advantageous to students of journalism and media studies.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is apparent that there are many similarities and shared values between the disciplines of librarianship and journalism. Furthermore, the ongoing discourses about fake news within the professions has drawn particular attention to the problem of evaluation and critical thinking skills of undergraduate students. It can be argued that for all the negative aspects of the proliferation of fake news, it has managed to put a positive focus on information and media literacy and has started an important conversation about the necessity of good evaluation and critical thinking skills, not just for students but for wider civil society. However, although many similarities in opinions and attitudes exist within the two professions, there is no meaningful interaction between the professions due to a lack of awareness of each other's common goals. This research found that the current lack of interaction between faculty and their respective libraries could be improved by better communication, where libraries promote their services and become more visible to the faculty. Journalism faculties appear to be unaware of the value the library can bring to their students particularly in terms of information literacy instruction and consider information literacy instruction to be part of their role as educators.

There was a remarkable openness to the idea of a collaboration or partnership with the library, in the development of a bespoke information literacy module

designed for journalism, media and broadcasting courses. By framing this research around the problem of fake news and the current discourses, it has highlighted the many overlaps of the two roles, which hopefully will lead to the prospect of fostering a stronger relationship – thus leading to journalists and librarians working together to reaffirm the status of truth.

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