Fighting Fake News and Preparing Students for a Digitally Literate Future

By Polly Krabbé

In today's world, literacy goes beyond just the basic ability to comprehend text. Today's students will also need to master a new skill — digital literacy. (Lynch, 2017)

Cornell University defines digital literacy as "the ability to find, evaluate, utilise, share, and create content using information technologies and the Internet" and there are many others such as "the 'savvyness' that allows young people to participate meaningfully and safely as digital technology becomes ever more pervasive in society" (Futurelab, 2011).

With increasing stories of the significant (and alarming) impact fake news and online security plays politically, socially, and economically across the globe, ensuring students develop digital literacy and independent research skills is essential. "Digital literacy just isn't optional. It's a requirement for success in the 21st Century . . ." (ITWeb, 2017).

From the fake news reports during the 2016 US general election, to the recent Facebook personal information scandals, their relationship with the online world can be considered one of the biggest challenges facing our young people today.

Young people consistently access information and news online. According to a recent study *News and Australian Children: How Young People Access, Perceive and are Affected by the News*, 41% of Australian teenagers access news on social media, 22% on websites, and 14% on mobile phone apps. Similarly, many young people believe that internet research is the best way to access information "69% . . . think they learn more from technology than from people" (Weller, 2017).

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While researching and accessing news via the internet is a valid option, if young people are not able to critically assess the articles they are reading, then this activity can become not only pointless but misleading, and possibly harmful. Being digitally literate will enable students "to move beyond the #FakeNews fallacies and make meaning of what we are learning" (Pasquini, 2017).

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Digital literacy skills are not only essential for discerning fake news but also for learning, employment, and citizenship: "No matter which field you enter you have to be able to discern reliable versus unreliable sources to do your work [and] be able to evaluate content you come across in order to deem whether or not it's important" (Proquest, 2016).

But surely, these young people – our 'digital natives' – who routinely get their news and information online, are savvy about what is true and what is false? Unfortunately, research has found that this is not the case.

"Only one third of young Australians believe they can tell fake news from real news" (Dezuanni, M. Howden, S. Notley, T. Zhong, H. F, 2017). And perhaps more worryingly, according to the same study, 54% of young people don't critique the source of news they encounter online, and hardly ever or never check whether news stories found on the internet are true. Australian young people are not unique in this – it is a global problem.

In the United States, over a period of six months, Stanford History Education Group set students across 12 states 56 tasks to discover their ability to judge the trustworthiness of the information they read online. 7,804 responses from students of secondary school to undergraduate age and from a wide range of institutions were

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collected and evaluated. The overwhelming conclusion that the majority of young people struggle to evaluate the credibility and reliability of the information shared online. For example, in one task 80% of middle school students (11-13yrs) could not differentiate between native advertising (identifiable by the words 'sponsored content') and real news stories.

In the UK, "More than a third (35 per cent) of teachers say that students have cited false information they have found online, according to a poll conducted by The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers" (Turner, 2017).

In the Republic of Ireland, Dr Fiona Chambers, the Acting Head of Education at University College Cork "says today's digital natives can use the technology but have 'no critical engagement at all'. This, she says, leaves students more vulnerable to the influence of fake news and other online risks" (McBride, 2018).

This research is just a small sample of the many studies and discussions that have taken place over the last few years, illustrating this global issue. It demonstrates that young people, without the necessary digital literacy skills, are vulnerable. "Students who lack digital literacy skills may soon find themselves at just as much of a disadvantage as those who cannot read or write" (Lynch, 2017).

Find more research on this topic here.

So how can librarians and educators prepare students for a digitally literate future?

> *Today, librarians are poised to play no less critical a role — helping tomorrow's leaders navigate an ever swelling sea of information, discerning the hard trust from convincing lies* (Holmes, 2018).

Collaboration between librarians and teaching staff is key

'Digital literacy' is sometimes thought to be something that can just sit alongside the curriculum where students learn a set of skills and then it is 'done'. This is not the case. Digital literacy is continuously evolving and therefore learning also needs to continue. It also needs to be taught within a subject context; digital literacy for science will be different from digital literacy for the arts and humanities. It is therefore important for librarians to involve teachers of different disciplines and make sure that digital literacy is integrated into their curricula.

Integrating these essential skills into the curricula will mean that students will learn what is appropriate to the subjects they are studying, they will better appreciate their relevance and importance, and are less likely to become disengaged or see digital literacy as an optional extra.

Teachers may be worried about the time and effort needed to explore the topic of digital literacy fully or they may still believe in the myth of 'digital natives' (ie that young people have the innate ability to use the internet) and think that there is nothing they can teach them that they don't know. By working with teaching staff, librarians will be able to share their expertise and knowledge and support them in embedding the necessary skills into the classroom.

Softlink Education offers some useful examples of how librarians across the globe are collaborating with teaching staff in their White Paper 'Ideas for school-wide collaboration'.

Practical ideas for promoting critical thinking and the evaluation of information

"Students are unaware of just how much of the information they find online is intended to mislead them in some way" (Jones, 2017). Promoting critical thinking and showing students how to evaluate the information they are reading will help this idea to resonate. Here are some ways librarians can do this:

- Encourage students to evaluate online articles through 'lateral reading' – leaving the site they are on and researching the name of the organisation and its owners or bosses, checking to see where and from whom the information that they are reading is from. "If there is only one place you're finding that information," O'Grady says, "I can almost guarantee it's not true" (Farmer, 2017).

- Check the bias of information by using the TRAAP test, this asks students to evaluate the timeliness, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose of the information. Students should question whether the content is sponsored (and if so by whom?). They must also understand that the 'About' section on a website is written by the site owners and thus is heavily biased. "If the language is overly persuasive, it should be treated with a healthy dose of suspicion. It's all about thinking critically" Harris, 2016).

- Students should also question whether the information they are reading is satire or a joke. If the language is too over the top or causes them a big emotional reaction, then it is quite possible that the information is questionable.

- Give students examples of the consequences fake news or misinformation have had in the past, perhaps in your own institution or on a higher level, to help them see why evaluation of research matters. As *Reliable Sources: Promoting Critical Thinking in the [Mis]information Age* suggests, examples such as Andrew Wakefield's discredited research on autism and vaccinations which sparked an entire anti-vaccination movement, or the more recent fake news stories shared on Facebook leading up to the US 2016 general election can illustrate the significant impact that not evaluating information can have.

- For many students Google is the only search engine they use "Teachers and students alike report that for today's students, 'research' means 'Googling'" (PewResearchCenter, 2012). Ensure students understand that the top search result on Google is not necessarily the most reliable one; Google's decision about who is at the top of the result is

based on a wide variety of factors. Remind students that they can use alternative search engines such as Bing, DuckDuckGo, Ixquick and WolframAlpha.

While some of the ideas above may seem like common sense it is clear from the research that the majority of students do not have the necessary skill set to enable them to be digital literate. The ability to critically evaluate sources may well be one of the most important skills of our time.

By empowering students to differentiate between fake and real news stories they not only develop good research skills but also learn to question and explore the world around them:

> *we build the foundation for entire generations for whom the truthfulness and usefulness of information is paramount, making for a stronger, smarter society* (Jones, 2017).

Investing in trusted online resources

Students should not, however, have to rely on the Internet for all their research. Many schools are now investing in e-resources from academic publishers – resources that offer carefully curated scholarly content – ensuring their students have access to the best trusted sources of information and research such as JSTOR, which provides a specially-created package of over 3,600 archival journals and four primary source collections for secondary schools covering the arts, sciences and business.

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These trusted e-resources also provide invaluable support for digital literacy and research skills and prepare students well for university and college where they will have extensive databases for their studies.

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