When was the Truth Era? Post-Truth, Toxic Nostalgia, and the Library Fixation with Fake News

Kevin Seeber / Auraria Library / University of Colorado Denver
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@kevinseeber / #capal19
There has been a lot of talk about “fake news” for the last few years...
The concept was around before the fall of 2016, but “Pizzagate” really brought it to the fore.
Lots of folks in the library world decided this was our time to shine.
After Trump Was Elected, Librarians Had To Rethink Their System For Fact-Checking

The American Library Association wants to help you distinguish real news from fake with the help of CRAAP.

By Maddie Crum
MISINFORMATION IS NO MATCH FOR A LIBRARIAN.

Separating fact from fiction poses a unique challenge in the internet era: a recent study found that 80% of middle schoolers couldn’t distinguish between sponsored news content and real journalism.*
As of last week, there are nearly 7,500 Fake News LibGuides.
Subsequently, library workers have stated “we are in a post-truth era” a few million times in the last few years. I have some problems with this sentiment.
We are in a post-truth era.

The sentiment is often expressed in first-person plural, implying a shared experience of "truth."

We all exist in a "real world" that is threatened by this "fake" one.
“We are in a post-truth era.”

The word “era” is often used to situate this phenomenon in time. (Another frequent temporal signifier is the word “now,” as in “now that facts don’t matter.”) It implies that norms change with time.
“We are in a post-truth era.”

The preposition “post” likewise implies that time is moving. In this use, we evidently had “truth,” but time has progressed and we’ve lost it.
The resulting sentiment is that we had a shared understanding of the world, and it only recently left us. And wouldn’t it be great if we could make it like that again?
My point: Lamentations about “post-truth” (especially from the left) represent the same toxic nostalgia as phrases like “Make America Great Again.”
By “toxic nostalgia,” I mean the desire to return to a nebulous past that never existed rather than engage with the complications of the present.
“We’re having to, sadly, take another look at the standard credibility that you and I, and children and adults everywhere, have taken for granted for years. That’s no longer there.”

Then-ALA President Julie Todaro, as quoted in The Huffington Post.
Technology gets blamed a lot in these discussions (i.e. you can’t trust websites the way you can trust books).
“Teachers and librarians have had to reconcile student interest in online sources — and the relevancy those sources have to their lives — with the fact that in the past, sites haven’t been as rigorously fact-checked as published books.” (Crum, 2017)
Let’s talk about why blaming the Internet is ahistorical and wrong.
The book *I Was Hitler’s Doctor* (1942), was written by Dr. Kurt Krueger.

Only it wasn’t written by Dr. Kurt Krueger (there is no Dr. Kurt Krueger). The author was Samuel Roth, a New York publisher who specialized in selling unauthorized copies of banned books (Hamalian, 1974).
The book sold 250,000 copies and is cited in multiple scholarly publications as though it’s genuine. (It’s not.)

Also, lots of libraries have it in their collection, shelved with the rest of German history.
OK, so maybe a few fabrications have been published in books over the years... That's not systematic like what we're seeing now.
This is a declassified memo detailing systematic disinformation committed by the U.S. government in Vietnam.
Yeah, but that’s Nixon. He’s the exception, not the rule. And this is supposed to be about how people read and understand “news.”
MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee are in doubt—The World has sent a Special Tug With Submarine Divers to Havana to find out—Lee asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry—255 Men Dead.

In a suppressed dispatch to the State Department, the Captain says the accident was made possible by an enemy.

Dr. E. C. Pendleton, just arrived from Havana, says he overheard talk there of a plot to blow up the ship.

Zalinski, the dynamite expert, and other experts report to The World that the wreck was not accidental—Washington officials ready for vigorous action if Spanish responsibility can be shown—Divers to be sent down to make careful examinations.

$50,000 REWARD. Who Destroyed the Maine? $50,000 REWARD.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AND ADVERTISER.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY.

Assistant Secretary Roosevelt convined the explosion of the war ship was not an accident.

The Journal offers $50,000 reward for the conviction of the criminals who sent 259 American sailors to their death.

Naval Officers unanimous that the ship was destroyed on purpose.

NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE was DESTROYED BY a SPANISH MINE.

Hidden mine or a sunken torpedo believed to have been the weapon used against the American man-of-war—Officer and men tell thrilling stories of being blown into the air amid a mass of shattered steel and exploding shells—Survivors brought to Key West scout the idea of accident—Spanish officials protest too much—Our Cabinet orders a searching inquiry—Journal sends divers to Havana to report upon the conclusion of the wreck.
Both William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer published fabrications in order to justify the U.S. going to war with Spain in 1898.
But that was the Gilded Age! Newspaper barons were running amok. It’s not like this has always been going on...
Benjamin Franklin printed a “hoax” article in 1782 describing an attack on American colonists by Iroquois and Seneca people. It relied on racist tropes to sway public opinion.
The article mimics the typography of the *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* (Boston, MA, USA). The edition was numbered in sequence with the paper and included the real editor’s name. Europeans accepted it as genuine.
My point: Disinformation has been used for centuries. And it’s often (though not always) used to shape the course of wars. Subsequently, lots of folks are using militarized language.
So if this has been going on for so long, why are we being told that it’s a recent development?
The first reason:
So we’ll surrender money and/or data to would-be protectors.
This is an advertisement that is predicated upon the idea that “truth” costs money.
This is an attempt to collect user data for an otherwise “free” fact-checking website. Note the use of the word “fight.”
EVALUATING INFORMATION FOR ACCURACY IS A SKILL THAT IS TIMELY—AND TIMELESS.

Two out of three of adults in the U.S. today say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.*

Thankfully, we have librarians, because teaching people how to be better consumers of information is the fundamental task at the heart of their profession.

This is an ALA fundraising campaign. Note the use of the word “timely.”
This is an ALA poster. Note the use of the phrase “real-world.”
The second reason: So we’ll accept *outrageous* technological “solutions” as seeming necessary.
It is not the job of social networks to protect democratic elections.
It is not the job of algorithms and artificial intelligence to decide what is “factual” or “biased.”
This is not a “fight against fake news” and library workers are not “on the front lines.”
This is not a “post-truth era” and there are not “alternative facts.”
The world is the same as it has always been. People in power will use disinformation to exert control and oppress the marginalized.
It is the job of libraries to discuss how information functions in society. Please, talk about this in your work.
References


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