

# Fake News: A Golden Opportunity to Develop Parent Advocates

With so many school library programs facing budget cuts, the need for advocacy has never been greater. Parents, as advocates for their children's education, are often the most vociferous and invested stakeholders who can help sway budget and staffing decisions. It is therefore critical that parents see how a trained school librarian teaches students to navigate and interpret the deluge of media messages that students are bombarded with daily. Librarians need to teach and share media literacy skills that students need and parents see as relevant. As such, the recent proliferation of fake news and alternative facts presents a clear opportunity for school librarians to clarify the relevance of their instructional programs and solidify their role in the education of students.

## Information Literacy Refined

Parents may monitor their children's time online, check their social media sites, and review websites visited, but knowing if the information their children find and use is accurate and truthful is a more complicated matter. A recent Stanford University study found that students often take information from blogs, tweets, visuals, and advertising at face value, without questioning sources or accuracy (Shellenbarger 2016). Students rely on these sources to learn and make decisions, not just in their classrooms today but likely throughout their lives to make career, financial, and health-related choices that will greatly impact their future. In the past, students turned to the librarian to select "good" information for their use from within the four walls of the library; today the role of information selector has been put in the pockets of the students—it's called a smartphone.

Teaching students how to discern the nuances of information and media messages in terms of context, purpose, bias, satire, hoaxes, and viral sensationalized stories may be the most important work that 21st-century school librarians can contribute to a student's education. Seizing on the concern over fake news and the central role of media in today's society, librarians should refocus information literacy instruction, perhaps calling it "media literacy." Media literacy can be defined simply as the ability to find, analyze, and create messages and information in all media formats—print, digital, and visual. Being able to describe what librarians teach and do has always been a challenge because, as Mark Ray states, librarians can't seem to keep it "simple and sexy." However, clear and simple messaging that reflects cultural and popular memes of the day will resonate with library stakeholders.

Librarians need to step up, carve out this instructional territory, and articulate media literacy skills that no one else teaches, focusing on interpretation and use of text, visual, and digital messages in all formats of media. This extends to radio, television, websites, advertising, and social media sources. Most national and state academic standards offer clear connections that validate this approach. For example, the Common Core standards at an elementary level include:

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.1.9 Grade 1

Identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).

### CSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.6 Grade 4

Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.

At a secondary level, the Common Core standards include:

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.8 Grade 7

Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient to support the claims.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7 Grades 9-10

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

Many school librarians have already embedded media skills instruction in their practice, but how many librarians articulate what they are teaching to the students' parents in clear and simple language? Are librarians helping parents to assist and monitor their child's use of media and Internet resources?

## Public Relations

AASL tells us that public relations (PR) or, as they say, telling "who we are, what we do, when and where, and for whom" is a critical component in developing advocates among parents and others ("What Is Advocacy?"). PR strategies illustrate how librarians are teaching students to be discerning users of information with practical strategies for distinguishing the dubious from the dependable, the factual from "truthiness" (according to dictionary.com "truthiness," as coined by Stephen Colbert, means something "seeming to be true according to one's intuition, opinion, or perception without regard to logic, factual evidence, or the like").

There are multiple PR opportunities to tell parents how school librarians are preparing students to select and use information. Here are some suggestions:

- Regularly author an article for the school's newsletter highlighting an evaluation skill taught to students
- Distribute a handout at parents' night summarizing skills taught by the librarian
- Demonstrate, with student helpers, subscription databases at open houses, tech nights, or family literacy programs
- Create a "Parents' Page" on the library's website

- Present at school and community organizations, i.e., public library "friends group," Chamber of Commerce, school board, PTA/PTO, etc.

## Marketing

To truly engage parents and foster advocacy, however, a marketing approach can have far more impact. Marketing identifies who the "customer" is, what they care about, and how the school library program can meet those needs ("What is Advocacy?"). Facilitating parent focus groups and inviting parents to join a school library advisory committee will illustrate the librarian's willingness to work with parents to prioritize skills and competencies that parents see as most needed (Kachel 2016). Librarians with multiple schools and non-library related duties need assistance in deciding which skills to teach given the limited contact time librarians have with students and to collaborate with teachers. What better way to do this than to invite parents to participate in that process? The librarian could facilitate meetings by presenting information-related competencies already included in the academic standards the school uses. After reviewing the standards, parents could discuss the standards in terms of appropriateness and mastery for their children. This process can be quite insightful.

Another way to elicit parents' concerns about their children's use of information is to engage with the school's PTA or PTO. As a teacher, the librarian can and certainly should join the school's PTA or request to be on the PTO if membership is controlled by the administration. Then, request that a meeting be focused on the issue of media literacy and the challenges for students in interpreting and using information. Consider asking the principal and the tech coordinator to attend as listeners, not defenders. Whether facilitating a focus group or presenting at a PTA meeting, expect to hear a wide range of issues that parents are concerned about, such as safety on the Internet, security of personal information, cyberbullying, viral videos, and more. An open exchange of ideas is good. Have someone take detailed notes so ideas can later be reviewed. Perhaps follow up with an online survey asking parents to rank the list of topics or concerns. Share the results at a faculty meeting to engender teacher support to include needed skills in collaborative lessons. Other outcomes may include organizing a student assembly on a certain topic, such as a program on Internet scams presented by the local police.

Too often librarians think that parent involvement with the library program means getting volunteers to check out or shelve books or to raise money. The real potential in creating parent advocates lies in respecting and asking for their opinions and letting them participate in their children's education. This is an essential advocacy practice in building partners—listening and attempting to create a library program to address their issues. Embracing the "hot topics" of the day and refining the information skills taught to students, librarians can keep their programs agile and responsive to stakeholders' concerns. By enabling a participatory environment with parents and articulating a prioritized, relevant curriculum, the school librarian's leadership and influence among school administrators, parents, and the community will be elevated ensuring the continued support of the school library program.

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