Information as Weapon: Propaganda, Politics, and the Role of the Library

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Information, from its creation and production to its dissemination and interpretation, and in all of its many formats, is an essential and ubiquitous element of everyday life, and is especially important for a functioning democracy. Individuals need access to quality information to support and inform their activities from participation in democratic elections and ballot initiatives to making decisions that will keep them safe and healthy. The purpose of this paper is to examine limitations of the concept of access to information as a human rights, and consider the roles and responsibilities of libraries in upholding such access. In particular, this paper builds on the conceptualizations of critical information literacy, as described by writers such as James Elmborg,[1] Rachel Hall,[2] Heidi Jacobs,[3] and Troy Swanson[4] and its place in supporting and enhancing information access through the development of information literacy competencies.

Kuklinkski et. al. contend that factual information is the currency of a democracy and under this premise, "its citizens must have ready access to factual information that facilitates the evaluation of public policy," and "citizens must then use these facts to inform their preferences."[5] The United Nations affirms free access of information as a basic human right, stating in Article 19 of its *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that freedom of expression encompasses the freedom to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."[6] This statement was reinforced in the declaration related to the role of mass media, which states "access by the public to information should be guaranteed by the diversity of the sources and means of information available to it, thus enabling each individual to check the accuracy of facts and to appraise events objectively."[7] While these declarations are not legally enforceable, they have underpinned the adoption of policies by various governments and NGOs that support access to information, and indeed there is evidence of legal and political for access to information as a human right.

Through an extensive review of international human rights law, Cheryl Ann Bishop builds on the work of Christopher Gregory Weeramantry and describes four conceptualizations of access to information as a human right.[8] Bishop notes that such access is often viewed as an ancillary or supporting right in that citizens require access to information in order to properly exercise their other basic rights such as the rights of freedom of expression, information privacy, a healthy environment, and the right to truth such as truth about human rights abuses. She concludes that the right to freedom of expression appears to offer the most support for promotion of access to information as its own human right. As Weeramantry states, "if there is reality in human rights at any level it must necessarily follow that access to the information appropriate to the exercise of that right becomes a right in itself."[9] Indeed, in the decades since the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was adopted, countries around the world have enacted Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation that at least

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nominally guarantees access to specific public information for their citizens. According to freedominfo.org, 93 countries had enacted freedom of information laws as of October 2012.[10]

Libraries have always been in the business of information, and in democratic societies such as the United States, libraries historically have emphasized free and equitable access to information. On a philosophical level, these values are evidenced by the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics which states "we uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources."[11] The Library Bill of Rights further expounds on these ideas by maintaining that libraries should build diverse collections that reflect all points of view, avoid excluding materials because of "partisan or doctrinal disapproval" and resist the "abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas."[12] On a more practical level, libraries enable access to information by providing free resources, including access to the technology necessary to engage with that information.

Such policy initiatives and efforts at enabling or increasing access might suggest that people's basic information access needs are well supported, at least in countries with FOI laws like the United States. Nevertheless, information lives within existing power structures, and those in positions of power often have the ability to limit access to or distort information despite policies to the contrary. The question, then, is whether simply providing and protecting *access* to information is sufficient? The following sections will examine these questions, beginning with an overview of the current state and limitations of information access, with a particular focus on the United States. Next, the paper considers the place of libraries and information literacy within this context. Finally, it concludes by extending the argument for information access to include critical information literacy as part of a right to education.

Access to Information and its Limitations

The prevalence of FOI legislation suggests that governments worldwide recognize the importance of information access, and are making efforts to enable and improve such access. However, these laws only serve their purpose if governments establish infrastructures to make information available, and if they honor requests for information. In some instances, governments might purposely suppress information, and in others the information may simply be so buried as to be essentially inaccessible. Further, not all information is equally valid or trustworthy. As noted above, entities in power—both public and private—can often distort information to serve their purpose. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to catalog all of the possible abuses and misuses of information, the following sections will outline some of the most common, along with specific examples and illustrations.

Suppression of Information

In general, freedom of information legislation protects a citizen's right to access information about their governments. According to United States Department of Justice's FOIA page, the majority of requests are fulfilled fully or in part. In 2011, only 6.9% were denied in full, while 53.9% were released in full and 39.2% were partially released.[13] However, these numbers do not necessarily tell the whole story. To begin with, the numbers do not make clear what a partial release is. In some cases, requestors may receive documents that have been redacted to an extent that renders them essentially useless. Further, while these are overview numbers, different agencies differ in their responsiveness. Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart contends that the Federal Communications Commission denied 46% of its FOIA requests in 2011, and has proposed legislation to increase transparency in this agency.[14] In addition, there is no indication of the time frame in which requests are fulfilled. At the moment, there is a backlog of 83,490 requests outstanding from 2011 alone.[15]

Nor is the United States alone in this matter. Around the world, governments are not always forthcoming in honoring the FOI requests that they receive. The Associated Press undertook an investigation of compliance in 105 countries, asking them to indicate how many arrests and convictions they had related to terrorism since the September 11 attacks in the United States.[16] They conclude that nearly half of the governments do not follow their own laws. According to their reports, only 14 of the 105 governments responded to information requests in full and within their legal deadlines, while another 38 countries eventually provided at most of the requested information. The Associated Press suggests that newer democracies appear to be more responsive. For instance, it states that Guatemala, Turkey, India, and

Mexico provided full information within deadlines. By contrast, Canada requested a 200-day extension, the United States FBI "responded six months late with a single sheet with four dates, two words and a large section blanked" and Austria never responded.[17]

Another limitation to FOI laws exists. Because these laws tend only to apply to government information, private industries and businesses in most countries are exempted from these laws. In 2010, Siraj estimated that only 19 out of 70 countries had FOI laws that applied to private as well as public companies. For instance, in the United States, publicly traded companies are required to publish certain information with the Securities and Exchange Commission for public consumption, but privately-owned businesses do not have any such requirements. Further, Siraj points to the series of spectacular scandals and frauds such as Enron, Worldcom, Tyco, and Firebird to illustrate that even publicly traded companies are not always held to—or manage to evade—disclosure laws. For instance, Enron did publish its SEC filings, but executives were apparently manipulating the accounting in order to post stock prices higher than they were actually worth.[18] While these examples focus mostly on government or government controlled information, other forms of suppression abound. When individuals or institutions strive to ban or destroy certain information altogether in order to deny people access to the ideas it embodies, it is often referred to as censorship.

Censorship and Destruction of Information

History is rife with examples of those in power censoring information. Knuth coined the terms libricide and bibliocide to describe such events, with the Nazi book burnings during World War II among the most famous examples. In addition to destroying documents and texts of many of the nations they invaded, the Nazis also burned research and documentation produced and housed in German institutions that did not reflect their perspective. For instance, in 1933 they burned the library and archives of the Institute for the Science of Sexuality in Germany, destroying years of research into sexuality, including supporting and legitimizing homosexuality In a political context, when an aggressor gains control of a region or nation, one act of power often involves destroying libraries as a way of suppressing the cultural identity of the occupied nation.[19] Such incidents continue to occur in the present day, in all parts of the world. For instance, on March 20, 2011, the pastor of a small church in Florida oversaw the burning of the Koran, claiming the book contributed to crimes against humanity.[20] Similarly, in 2002, HarperCollins threatened not to release Michael Moore's book Stupid White Men, and to destroy existing, undistributed copies, when he refused to retract or rewrite portions critical to then-president George W. Bush.[21] ALA tracks reports of censorship and book banning in the United States, and according to its statistics, hundreds of books are challenged in libraries each year, with sexually explicit content being the reason most often given for challenging.[22] These examples demonstrate that there are many parties that still actively seek to suppress information. Unfortunately, even when information is accessible, it is not always accurate, leading to the next section on misinformation.

Distortion and Propaganda

There are a variety of ways in which individuals or organizations—including politicians, lobbyists, public relations firms, and even news media—can manipulate information in order to distort the message or disseminate misinformation, influencing the thoughts and reactions of the message receiver. One obvious way to distort information is to only present one side of the story, and suppress or ignore information to the contrary. However, some researchers argue that media outlets often distort a message, especially in science-related topics, by giving too much attention to outlier viewpoints when most experts have agreed on conclusion. For instance, the vast majority of scientists agree that climate change is actually taking place, or that theory of evolution is accurate. However, in an effort to be fair or unbiased in their reporting, news reports will often give equal air time to those who object to or deny these theories. Such reporting can lend legitimacy to the objector's argument and make it appear to viewers as if the issue is still being debated, when most scientists have accepted a certain point as fact.[23,24] While it may not be the intention, these reports might influence viewers' perceptions.

In the case of propaganda, individuals and organizations disseminate information with the purpose to persuade people to a certain point of view or opinion. For instance, Yasin Al-Yasin and Ali A. Dashti discuss the amount of money that foreign governments spend each year to hire American public rela-

tions and lobbying firms in order to bolster the image of their country in the United States, or to make lobby to Congress on behalf of that country. Their research shows that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia spent over $83 million dollars on such advertising in the 2000s, and over $181 million in total from the 1970s to the present. They contend that some of these firms, in particular Hill & Knowlton (H+K), were hired by the government of Kuwait to help to make a case for going to war with Iraq under both presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush.[25] While such campaigns do not necessarily involve false information or inaccuracies, there are certainly plenty of examples of public relations and advertising efforts that have deliberately spread misinformation. Al-Yasin and Dashti, in an eloquent understatement, note that "[f]alsehood in wartime is also, unfortunately, inevitable," and mention, but do not elaborate on the public relation firm's release of "some videotapes containing stories now known to be based on false and misleading information about events which never occurred."[26] These videotapes involved testimony, also given to Congress, by a 15 year-old girl claiming to have seen Iraqi soldiers removing premature babies from incubators and leaving them to die on the hospital floor. It was later revealed that the girl was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States, and was probably not even in Kuwait at the time the alleged atrocities took place. Eventually the entire story was discredited.[27] Other famous examples of propaganda include the tobacco industry which engaged in large-scale public relations efforts beginning in the 1950s to counter the growing scientific evidence of the harmfulness of smoking.[28]

Effects of Censorship and Misinformation

The impacts of censorship and misinformation on individuals and the community can be damaging. Misinformation has lasting detrimental effects. Unfortunately, once misinformation is disseminated and received, it can be difficult to correct. When errors of fact are discovered in reporting, as was the case with the study on Autism and vaccines, the original source usually will issue a retraction. However, these retractions are usually disconnected in time and space from the original source. In general, the original article will appear in one issue of a journal, and the retraction will be printed in a later issue, sometimes separated by years. While some databases mark retracted articles, others do not, meaning there is no visual cue to let a searcher know that an article has been discredited. As a result, retractions are often ineffective in correcting misinformation.[29] Research shows that retracted scientific articles continue to be cited as legitimate research well after the retractions are issued. A study of 235 articles retracted over a 30 year period found 2,000 citations, of which only 8% acknowledged the retraction.[30] An ongoing analysis of 1,164 articles retracted from science journals between 1997 and 2009 has found 391 citations so far, with only 6% acknowledging the retraction.[31] In terms of misinformation, individuals often experience the *continued influence effect*, or "the persistent reliance on such misinformation, even when people can recall a correction or retraction."[32]

People who are uninformed or misinformed will still make judgments and decisions, many of which might be misleading or even harmful. If enough people form beliefs or make judgments based on misinformation, "it can lead to collective preferences that differ significantly from those that would exist if people were adequately informed."[33] Examples of the impact on collective opinion and the continued influence effect can be seen in a wide variety of studies. For example, parents continue to choose not to vaccinate their children based on the now discredited study on Autism and MMR. Not only have those parents left their own children vulnerable to disease, but the actions have led to an overall increase in these diseases, and have led to costly public awareness campaigns.[34]

Similarly, many Americans were swayed to support the two Persian Gulf Wars based on misinformation surrounding atrocities committed by Iraqi soldiers leading to the first war, and claims about the connections between Iraq and Al-Qaeda or the presences of weapons of mass destruction preceding the second war. In these cases, collective opinions and beliefs were constructed on a foundation of misinformation. In terms of continued influence effect, studies show nearly one-half of Americans polled believed the United States had evidence linking Iraq to Al-Qaeda, and just over 20% believed the United States had evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, even after the intense press coverage to the contrary.[35]

Censorship and suppression of information are harmful. When people lack factual information, they still make judgments or decisions, and form opinions, based on what they do know, or believe. When infor-

mation is withheld or censored, people develop beliefs based on what information is available, and they eventually accept those beliefs as fact. In the absence of information, people supply the missing pieces with inferences, and "[o]nce people store their factual inferences in memory, these inferences are indistinguishable from hard data."[36] Those inferences will be formed to fit into existing beliefs and knowledge system, and thus are likely to be biased toward an individual's pre-existing beliefs. Once beliefs are encoded as fact, individuals tend to be confident in their own knowledge. Indeed, those holding the most inaccurate beliefs also display the highest level of confidence in those beliefs.[37] A study of political beliefs reveals that some subjects actually increase their belief in the misinformation when they were presented with correcting facts, a phenomenon known as backlash effect.[38]

Not Just Access: Education

Knowing the issues and challenges surrounding the access to and use of information in society, the question is how to improve the situation? What conditions will lead to a better informed citizenry, and what can the library do to enable those conditions? Access to information has become central to many nations around the world, but simple access may not be enough if it is not supported by education. Indeed, even the right to free access of information is not meaningful if people do not know that they have that right. Not all citizens are aware of this right, and even those that are might not always be willing to pursue access to information that is not readily available. Steven Aftergood notes that those who seek information under FOI laws might need to be "prepared to litigate their request," a course that might not appeal to many, and might also be costly, despite support from agencies like the James L. Knight Foundation.[39]

Even when information is available, however, it can be misleading or distorted. Once inaccurate information is encoded by the receiver, it is difficult to correct. One important step in combatting the effect of misinformation is to educate the public to evaluate information and its sources, thus minimizing the chances of indiscriminately accepting inaccurate information. Those who are more educated "call upon many sources of information that can be utilized to question and counter new information," thus making education "a powerful cognitive resource that can undermine political propaganda."[40] For instance, individuals with higher levels of education generally exhibited greater factual accuracy about circumstances surrounding the Iraq War, although those who relied on unbalanced news sources were susceptible to misinformation regardless of their education level.[41] Education that calls on higher-order skills such as deep reading and analysis of text and sources appears to be more effective than standard lectures or straight text in correcting misinformation and assumptions.[42]

In particular, individuals need to learn how to assess information for credibility and validity, so that it becomes an internalized response whenever they are presented with new information. Lewandowsky et. al. contend that such skepticism about information sources can reduce a person's vulnerability to misinformation.[43] Their research found that suspicion or distrust of information sources, or underlying reasons for dissemination of information tends to result in more accurate understandings and processing of information,[44] and specific training in media literacy can also result in an individuals' being less susceptible to bias in the news.[45] To that end, Carlson argues that evaluation of sources and credibility should be integrated into critical thinking, and laments that few courses on critical thinking explicitly address source validation.[46] Interestingly, some research also suggests that media literacy can help to overcome some of the backlash effect experienced when information consumers are confronted with information that contradicts strongly held positions. When individuals understand news production and dissemination, and are taught to evaluate the sources, they appear more able to overcome their biases when presented with correcting information.[47]

As such, education is essential to ensure that individuals can not only access but also understand and interpret the information they need. Indeed, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization affirms the right to education as a "fundamental human and essential to the exercise of all other human rights."[48] It is worth noting that the United States Constitution does not include the right to education. In fact, while the states are forbidden to deny children access to education, the Supreme Court "stopped short of actually defining education as a fundamental right, thereby making educational policy vulnerable to variable constitutional interpretations and shifting political priorities."[49] Administration of education is left to the states, and generally handled

at a local level. As a result, there is wide variability in education across the nation. Since public schools mostly are funded at the local level, schools in wealthier neighborhoods affording better facilities and staff. To put it plainly, while the United States Government has enacted legislation to support its citizens' access to information, it does not necessarily guarantee citizens the right to an education that would enable them to understand, evaluate, and effectively use that information.

The Role & Responsibility of Libraries

Libraries have the opportunity to play a fundamental role in supporting and advancing democratic citizenship through access to information and education. Both in their role as a facilitator of access, and in through education in information literacy competencies, librarians can contribute to creating information consumers. One of the core skills of information literacy is the ability to locate and access information efficiently and effectively. In libraries, we often interpret this to mean understanding subject cataloging systems, and knowing how to search physical and electronic resources. However, the ability to access information might also encompass understanding one's rights regarding that access. As such, libraries can help to publicize the right to information access, as well as support citizens in their requests, including educating them about sources of funding and legal aid such as the Knight Foundation and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Similarly, librarians could gather and disseminate information on education policy and debate, in order to keep the public informed about their rights regarding access to education.

However, as noted above, learning to evaluate information and its sources and developing a healthy skepticism are among the best ways to avoid or overcome the effects of misinformation. Librarians have been at the forefront of information literacy programs from the beginning, and should continue to identify opportunities to connect with patrons to help them develop their competencies. Part of information literacy involves evaluation of information, which could be framed as developing the kind of healthy skepticism toward information and its sources described by Lewandowsky et. al.[50] The need for such skepticism has been noted from other quarters as well. In one study, teaching faculty suggested that librarians have a role to play in helping develop the skepticism and evaluative skills of college students.[51] These faculty members note that students too often accept information unquestioningly, and fail to dig deeper to uncover sources, biases, and motivations behind the presentation of information. Certainly, librarians understand the importance of information evaluation, and generally try to address it in library instruction sessions. Nevertheless, research suggest that librarians tend to spend the bulk of their instruction time on the skills of searching and access, with substantially less time spent on evaluation of information and sources.[52] Considering the limited time most librarians have for in-class sessions, it is a challenge to address the many skills and competencies adequately. However, the importance of evaluation might justify increased and regular attention to that area in library instruction.

Perhaps most importantly, librarians may need to re-examine our ethical codes and practices in light of research on information and misinformation, and engage in self-reflection regarding how well we carry out the roles we have set for ourselves in promoting information access in support of a democratic society. The guidelines and ethical codes of our profession are clear in their support of individual's rights to seek and access information regardless of race, age, background, etc., and are equally clear in their opposition to censorship. While there are various high-profile cases of librarians standing up to censors, it is unclear how well we uphold these ideals on a day-to-day basis. It is important to note that, while they are usually advocates for intellectual freedom and against censorship, and despite policies and ethical codes to the contrary, librarians sometimes consciously or unconsciously enable censorship themselves. In some cases, librarians take steps to limit access to materials in response to real or perceived public pressure. For instance, the librarians remove a title from the collection on the request (or demand) of powerful stakeholders, or they might avoid purchasing a provocative resource altogether in order to avoid potential controversy. In other cases, librarians will reclassify a book for instance from the children's section to the adult area, or keep resources in closed area to be circulated only by request. In each of these instances, the librarians are limiting access and thereby exercising a form of censorship or information control. In addition, by relying exclusively or heavily on publisher catalogs and popular review sources, librarians might be overlooking alternative or minority perspectives

that might only appear in smaller, independent catalogs or publishing houses.[53,54] Finally, in an era when many libraries are adopting patron-driven acquisitions as a way to be more responsive to the desires of the community, are libraries running the risk of reinforcing the majority opinions of the community, or the perspectives of the most active users, and ignoring under-represented points of view? Possibly, libraries are creating echo chambers in which active or vocal community members will find their own ideas and opinions reflected back to them within library collections, while other perspectives will remain invisible.

Conversely, it might be possible that libraries occasionally over-extend themselves in their pursuit of balance and representing diverse points of view. If news media can be criticized for misrepresenting the scale of argument or the balance of debate when giving air time to outlying opinions on scientific questions that have been settled by a majority of experts, might not libraries be distorting information or misleading patrons if they consciously stock inaccurate information solely to ensure that a particular perspective is represented? Granted, libraries have goals in addition to informing the public, which include preserving information. And, too, even inaccurate information can be important for historical or political context. However, we might have to ask ourselves whether they are better or more responsible ways of collecting, organizing, and making accessible information that is known to be inaccurate or discredited so that it is not being censored but also is not being promoted as a legitimate or authoritative source. What is the appropriate balance between collecting and preserving the human record, and educating our patrons to be good consumers of information? There is not a clear answer to this question, but it may be time for librarians to open the debate.

Conclusion

Access to information, which has always been a central tenet of libraries, is finding increasing support from governments and non-governmental organizations around the world, as these entities recognize the importance of information access to democratic participation in government. Unfortunately, freedom of information legislation does not always work as it should. Further, access to information without education does not fulfill the purpose of developing an informed citizenry ready to engage in meaningful debate and make decisions. People need support to develop the competencies necessary to understand and evaluate the information—and misinformation—with which they are confronted on a daily basis.

Librarians have long stood in support of intellectual freedom and against censorship. At this point, however, librarians need to consider where they fall in the balance of providing access to all kinds of information, regardless of point of view, authority, or credibility, and supporting, advocating for, and even developing the information literacy competencies that include the ability to understand and evaluate information. In its *Alexandria Proclamation*, the International Federation of Library Associations maintains that information literacy is "a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations."[55] Paul Sturges and Almuth Gastinger go further, claiming that "a clear line of argument can be set out to link the (passive) intellectual freedom of information rights offered by Article Nineteen of the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights, to a consequent responsibility on governments, professionals, and civil society activists for the (active) creation of suitable conditions for the effective exercise of intellectual freedom."[56] The question for librarians now is how actively will we engage in developing and promoting these ancillary rights which underpin the exercise of all other human rights? The time is ripe for librarians to define their role in relation to freedom of information and information literacy as basic human rights.

Notes

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