

Post-truth or post-libraries?

The Italian translation of a message posted to IFLA's *Library policy and advocacy blog* was published in the first issue of last year¹. It was aimed at drawing attention to the many initiatives designed to tackle the growing phenomenon of post-truth, a term that the *Oxford Dictionary* had announced as the Word of the Year 2016. Emphasis was placed on a set of actions taken by IFLA to enable librarians to provide their readers a good service even at a time of crisis. The post was complemented by an infographic titled *How to spot fake news* showing eight simple steps (based on FactCheck.org's 2016 article bearing the same title²) to discover the verifiability of a given news-piece. The infographic was soon quite popular; to date, translations in 39 languages are available on the IFLA website³.

The expression 'fake news', identifying a phenomenon which is far from new, is nowadays widely used by print, broadcast and social media. The term was even criticised as misleading, since it appears to bring together manifestations which are in fact quite distinct. There are plenty of examples in history of intentional counterfeiting of data and events set up to shape what is nowadays known as 'public opinion'. However, the specific features of digital information and the development in networking devices have given rise to a different scenario. In a debate concerning a fact or a news one has the impression that truth is considered a minor issue. Facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

A major concern about the impact that post-truth culture could have on policy making in fields such as education, research, and healthcare has led to the organisation of the March for Science, a non-partisan movement to celebrate science and the role it plays in everyday life. The event consisted of a series of rallies and marches held in more than 500 cities across the world on Earth Day, April 22, 2017 «to emphasize that science upholds the common good and to call for evidence-based policy in the public's best interest»⁴.

At first, some agencies sought to detect and ban every single fake news. A number of countries, including Italy, suggested the need for legal provisions, even though the odds were against success. When libraries, in turn, were faced with the challenge of changing processes and

1 Karolina Andersdotter, *Fatti alternativi e fake news: la verificabilità nella società dell' informazione*, «AIB Studi», 57 (2017), n. 1, p. 5-6, <<http://aibstudi.aib.it/article/view/11618/10892>> (original title: *Alternative Facts and Fake News: verifiability in the Information Society*, January 27, 2017, <<https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/2017/01/27/alternative-facts-and-fake-news-verifiability-in-the-information-society/>>).

2 Eugene Kiely; Lori Robertson, *How to spot fake news*, November 18, 2016, <<https://www.factcheck.org/2016/11/how-to-spot-fake-news/>>.

3 See: <<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>>.

4 March for Science (principles and goals): <<https://web.archive.org/web/20170318183426/https://www.marchforscience.com/mission-and-vision>>.



services to tackle the problem, the disparity between the amount of news to be vetted compared to the amount of available resources became evident. At the same time the risk of freedom limitation due to news labelled as fake had to be taken into serious consideration.

This concern contributed to revive the debate about how libraries should remain impartial with respect to issues requiring the use of devices as well as the setting up of channels of communication. Over the decades, the issue of impartiality was raised many times as testified literature. The dispute dating 1972-73 which followed the publication in the *Library Journal* of David Berninghausen's paper on the social responsibility of libraries is still cited today. Driven by the protest movements in the second half of the Sixties, the American Library Association had decided to revise the *Library Bill of Rights*, encouraging, in Berninghausen's opinion, the librarians' commitment in social issues other than those pertaining to the professional sector. It was Berninghausen's fear that by doing so librarians would fail to fulfill their obligations towards intellectual freedom. The latter could have only been met by complying to strict neutrality. He therefore wrote:

It is essential that librarians in their professional activities shall view such [social] issues as subordinate to the principle of intellectual freedom, for, unless men have access to all varieties of expression as to the facts, theories, and the alternative solutions to these problems, they will be unable to apply their powers of reason toward their resolution⁵.

Berninghausen's approach was never unanimously accepted, if anything because the idea of neutrality lends itself to a variety of meanings. Whether libraries are or can afford to be really neutral in selecting their acquisitions is questionable. This selection has to take into account factors such as the budget or even the authors' and the publishers' reputation.

In order to keep faith to their responsibility towards their communities («Given libraries' mission to help all their users access and apply the information they need for personal and community development, this is an important part of the practice of librarianship»⁶) bearing in mind the sustainability factor, and to prevent the risk of being accused of taking it upon themselves to decide which of the opinions is more true and more real, many librarians have resorted to information literacy. In their approach, libraries should play a crucial role in developing and promoting skills in areas such as research, evaluation, selection, organisation, and use of information and data. On the other hand, while not denying the importance of pursuing the users' proficiency in using tools and sources at their disposal, other librarians consider these issues as insufficient to give substance to the social responsibility of libraries.

Given that the web has become a fundamental part of our daily activities, establishing itself as the main channel of our relationships as well as a device capable of shaping public opinion in a much more pervasive way than print or broadcast media, the library's social responsibility is implemented by yet another mission. The *IFLA Statement on Digital Literacy*, issued in August 2017, goes straight to the point:

⁵ David K. Berninghausen, *Antithesis in librarianship: social responsibility vs. the Library bill of rights*, «Library journal», 97 (1972), n. 20, p. 3675.

⁶ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, *Statement on digital literacy*. 2017, p. 1, <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/faife/statements/ifla_digital_literacy_statement.pdf>.

Furthermore, there is evidence of declining confidence in the Internet. Cybercrime and inadequate privacy protection give the impression that the Web is a dangerous place, leading users either to disconnect (or not connect at all), limit their activities, or seek out 'safe spaces'. The rise of 'fake news' and tales of anti-social behaviour online are used to justify calls for censorship by governments and others. IFLA both supports the right of all to sustainable, inclusive development and an open Internet that offers people the opportunity to improve their lives, and rejects censorship and unnecessary or disproportionate restrictions on access to information online. Enhancing individuals' capacity to access and get the most out of the Internet, and to do so with confidence, offers the best, most sustainable solution for realising the potential of the Internet⁷.

Fake news is but one of the factors causing misinformation leading to post-truth. Another kind of misinformation is caused by the phenomenon known as 'filter bubble'. The term was coined by the internet activist Eli Pariser and discussed in his book bearing the same title. The concept implies the state of intellectual isolation in which users find themselves when they become separated from information that disagrees with their viewpoints. This happens when a website algorithm selectively guesses what information a user would like to see based on information generated by or about the user, such as location, past click-behaviour and search history. In Pariser's words a filter bubble is «that personal ecosystem of information that's been catered by these algorithms»⁸.

According to the definition provided by Techopedia:

A filter bubble is the intellectual isolation that can occur when websites make use of algorithms to selectively assume the information a user would want to see, and then give information to the user according to this assumption [...]. A filter bubble, therefore, can cause users to get significantly less contact with contradicting viewpoints, causing the user to become intellectually isolated⁹.

Whilst the user's desire to feel cocooned and safe in a space that he or she considers familiar is amplified, the chances that new knowledge will derive from confrontation with different viewpoints decline dramatically. In other words, the user is self-indoctrinated. Tim Berners-Lee has little doubts about the way sensitive data are treated within social networks:

«The web evolved into a powerful, ubiquitous tool because it was built on egalitarian principles. [...] The web as we know it, however, is being threatened in different ways. Some of its most successful inhabitants have begun to chip away at its principles.»

In conclusion: «The more you enter, the more you become locked in»¹⁰. Bearing in mind the meaning of the term 'web', one would say 'nomen omen'.

⁷ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, *Statement on digital literacy* cit., p. 2.

⁸ Eli Pariser, *The filter bubble: what the Internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

⁹ <<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28556/filter-bubble>>.

¹⁰ Josh Halliday; Tim Berners-Lee, *Facebook could fragment web*, «The guardian», November 22, 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/nov/22/tim-berners-lee-facebook>>.

By pursuing the aim of increasing the awareness of their users and by opening themselves to society, libraries are offered an extraordinary opportunity to regain popularity and to support their role more vigorously as part of advocacy campaigns.

The issues at stake are ethically sensitive. At the same time, they require a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore we have considered appropriate to invite several specialists to contribute a paper on their insights into these matters. Giorgio Antoniacomi, director of Trento Public Library and previously director of Pergine spettacolo aperto and of the Centro servizi culturali Santa Chiara, Trento, and Gino Roncaglia, professor at the University of Tuscia, as well as author of books and texts for television programmes on Information and Communication Technologies are the distinguished guests of the present issue.

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[Paul Gabriele Weston, Anna Galluzzi, *Post-verità o post-biblioteche?*
AIB studi, vol. 58 n. 1 (gennaio/aprile 2018), p. 5-8. DOI 10.2426/aibstudi-11784]