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Curbing Fake News: A Qualitative Study of the Readiness of Academic Librarians in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

While fake news has been a common problem for well over a century, the emergence of social media and smartphones has escalated its spread. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the readiness of academic librarians in curbing fake news. Data was drawn from interviews with reference library staff and head librarians who were purposively selected from 12 academic libraries and evaluated through the lens of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA] guide on 'how to spot fake news'. The study revealed that although academic librarians were aware of fake news, they do not grasp the complexity and intricacies of the phenomenon. Therefore, the study recommends regular on-the-job training for academic librarians in identifying fake news. The Library and Information Science departments of universities in Ghana should review their curriculum to include training and education on problematic information. There should be collaboration between libraries and social media organization on curbing fake news. We support the call for information literacy, critical thinking and media literacy instructions to be embedded in all subjects with academic librarians as co-instructors.

KEYWORDS

Fake news; misinformation; disinformation; problematic information; academic libraries; Ghana

Introduction

In recent years, fake news has become increasingly widespread, affecting all spheres of life. However, the phenomenon is not new and has always been with us (Andrejevic, 2019; Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). It has gained notoriety primarily because of the convergence of communication technologies (Ahiabenu, Ofosu-Peasah & Sam, 2018; Rose-Wiles, 2018), the growth of social media platforms and its online virality (Venturini, 2019). It has become so complex that factors that information professionals use to determine trustworthy information are now questionable (Westerlund, 2019). National policies/legislation to curb fake news is seen as a window for censorship and human rights abuse (United Nations Human Rights, 2017).

The Ghanaian public news space has witnessed several news articles or social media posts that have been purported to be false (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2019). This phenomenon has become

predominant in the political landscape, especially during electioneering periods (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

Information verification and source validation have been at the forefront of librarianship since its inception (Courtney, 2018). However, the changing convergence of technology and information generating tools has made tracking and compliance very problematic. The concerns of academic librarians have been how to help faculty and students decipher what is accurate from what is factually inaccurate.

This is becoming increasingly difficult to control because of how easy it is to "create and disseminate inaccurate and misleading information" (Fallis, 2015, p. 402) as a result of the advancement of technology (Ngwainmbi, 2019; Westerlund, 2019). Loertscher (2017) laments that even search engines have been programmed to study each user's information preferences, so they feed users with what they like to receive.

Table 1. Terms synonymous with fake news.

Types	Meaning	Articles
Misinformation	An honest mistake in spreading false or inaccurate information	(Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014)
Misrepresentation	A statement made with conscious ignorance or a reckless disregard for the truth that can create liability.	(Young, 2021)
Disinformation and hoaxes	False information intended to mislead, such as propaganda	(Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014; Young, 2021)
Deepfakes	Digitally manipulating videos that depict someone saying or doing something that in reality is not true.	(Westerlund, 2019)
Yellow Journalism	An old term of fake news in the 1890s	(Campbell, 2019)
Mal-information	Right information used in the wrong context to incite hatred against a particular group	(Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)
False connection	Where headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content	
False context	Genuine content shared with false contextual information	
Manipulated content	Genuine imagery/information manipulated to deceive	
Misleading content	Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual	
Imposter content	Genuine sources that are impersonated	

While scholarly research on fake news is abundant (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018), especially since the Arab uprising, the 2016 U.S election and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, scholarly literature on what academic librarians in Ghana are doing to assist minimize the effect of fake news is sparse. Thus, this paper examines the readiness of academic librarians in Ghana to help minimize fake news using the IFLA guide on “how to spot fake news.”

We are convinced that academic librarians play a vital and mediating role in raising awareness of fake/bad news and should be aware of strategies and frameworks that can be deployed to support faculty and students’ information needs.

Literature review

What is fake news?

Fake news is the same as misinformation (false and misleading) and disinformation (false information intended to deceive) (Lazer et al., 2018). Fake news is also referred to as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent”. (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). Fake news has elements of fiction and deception (Ngwainmbi, 2019). It is either to mislead, damage an individual or an entity, entertain, gain readership, or for political or financial benefits (Ngwainmbi, 2019). In other words, real news will be an accurate account of a factual event.

Some scholars are moving away from the term ‘fake news’ because of the notion that it does not adequately represent the spectrum of mis/disinformation or problematic information (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Habgood-Coote, 2019). The term fake news has often been used interchangeably with other concepts namely; misinformation, misrepresentation, false news, problematic or bad news. Table 1 outlines a spectrum of different terms often used synonymously in place of fake news.

Instances of fake news and the dangers

Fake news has become dangerous for human society and every country’s democracy (Borges et al., 2019; Qayyum et al., 2019). For example, the recent COVID-19 has become the latest target for fake news on most social media outlets. In the view of Neto et al. (2020), the COVID-19 virus comes together with misinformation, causing harm to people.

Several videos, audio and texts have been bundled around on diverse social and traditional media about the virus. Some of these stories as reported in the literature include; the fact that the virus was from a failed laboratory experiment (Azim et al., 2020), the unwillingness of some people to take the vaccine based on false claims about the efficacy and safety of the vaccine which ultimately led to some anti-vaccine rallies and protests in countries like the United States and certain regions of Europe (Carrion-Alvarez & Tijerina-Salina, 2020), the shortages of medicines

such as hydroxychloroquine or medical facial masks as a consequence of fake news on their usage, ranging from the well-known "Big Pharma" (Neto et al., 2020), the nonexistence of the virus due to claims of microchips in vaccines, the stealing of personal information, and the implementation of 5G to reduce the population of some countries (Islam et al., 2020). Carrion-Alvarez and Tijerina-Salina (2020) aptly describe this phenomenon as "destructive beliefs" during the pandemic that has continued if not increased.

Westerlund (2019), in an article on deepfakes revealed that during the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, a video that was being circulated depicted a suspect being shot dead by police which was later discovered to be a different incident in the U.S. The suspect in the Christchurch shooting was not killed. Westerlund (2019) warns that deepfakes can threaten national security and even cause wars. He reveals that such videos can be used to depict a politician taking bribe, confessing a crime or admitting a secret plan to carry out a crime. For example, in Malaysia, a deepfake in which a man admitted to having sex with a local cabinet minister caused political controversy.

Stories like these can cause mistrust toward even genuine information provided by authority since it makes people regard everything as a deception (Westerlund, 2019). One of the factors in determining trustworthy information is through expert or authoritative sources. Thus, it is indeed a great danger if this too can be manipulated for malicious intents.

The danger of misinformation is that the probability of people accepting whatever is consistent with their inherent/preexisting beliefs is very high and fast. In contrast, the likelihood of correcting that misinformation is very low and slow (Kumar & Geethakumari, 2014). Ngwainmbi (2019) suggests that people tend to trust negative rather than positive information. Accordingly, fake news is woven based on these assumptions.

Why fake news?

Several reasons account for the phenomenon of fake news. There are a lot of unscrupulous individuals who profit from disseminating false news.

For instance, teenagers in North Macedonia earned thousands of dollars by getting many clicks through fake news they shared on Facebook about U.S President Donald Trump during the 2016 election (Kirby, 2016). Ahiabenu, Ofori-Peasah and Sam (2018) also suggest that the growing appetite for fast news and short news cycle accounts for an increase in the fake news phenomenon.

Fake news has no restrictions and cuts across all spheres of discourse. One of the most famous and oldest playgrounds for spreading fake news has and is still in the political arena (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). During elections, propaganda takes a foothold where parties try to outdo each other to gain votes even if it means misinforming or disinforming the electorates (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

The phenomenon has become endemic and an increasing threat to the sustainability of democracy and human rights. The scourge of fake news in the African context is phenomenal and even more dangerous in the political arena (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018).

Ngwainmbi (2019) suggests that the phenomenon is also prevalent in academia. For instance, text interpretation could be made to support one's bias. In the field of academia, some studies have also suggested that some researchers also gather data to support their own beliefs and ideologies thereby impeding on the validity of their findings (Chiou & Tucker, 2018)

It is difficult to stop the spread of fake news because as Chopra et al. (2019) indicate, people have a demand for more biased news and this demand is influenced by a craving to confirm preexisting beliefs or as Golman et al. (2017) suggest; people might rationally choose to avoid legitimate information as a means to maintain optimism. This is consistent with Young's (2021) argument that interventions aimed at curbing the menace ought to account for the psychological and emotional processes triggered by misinformation.

However, the growing concern with fake news is how it affects those who genuinely do not know that what they are trusting is fake. Also, it is becoming extremely difficult to distinguish what is real and what is fake due to advances in

technology. Again, the ease and speed with which items can be received and reposted is very worrying (Citron & Chesney, 2019; Rose-Wiles, 2018; Westerlund, 2019).

Call to action

Some individuals/organizations have called on authorities to curb the growing menace of fake news (Ireton & Posetti, 2018; Talwar et al., 2020). However, others have cautioned that in the light of free speech, which is guaranteed under the constitution of most countries, caution must be exercised in order not to infringe on the rights of citizens (Levinson, 2017; United Nations Human Rights, 2017). Irrespective of the right to freedom of expression, measures must be instituted to curb this escalating threat of fake news.

The role of librarians in helping patrons recognize fake news

The role of librarians in managing the fake news menace has been long standing. As far back as 1989, it became necessary for the American Library Association (ALA) presidential committee on information literacy to bring this issue to prominence (ALA., 1989). The report stressed the significance of the librarian's role in supporting patrons to select and evaluate information resources and why creating an information literate society was necessary. The report further highlights the looming danger of biases and "expert opinions" on citizenship in a modern democracy. It concluded that information literacy is a survival skill needed in detecting misinformation/disinformation for political and monetary gains and therefore was essential to guarantee the survival of democratic institutions.

With the growing concerns with misinformation/disinformation, librarians and information professionals are called to manage the crisis (Jacobson, 2017; Rose-Wiles, 2018). However, as Ecker (2015) suggests, the issue is not about recognizing which information is misinformation/disinformation but how to change what misinformation/disinformation does to people's minds.

Berry (2016) opines that the current misinformation situation is the most difficult challenge in

library history. Walsh (2010, p. 508) cautions that "we [librarians] teach our users how to acquire knowledge and not to decide what knowledge they should acquire". Thus, one wonders what role academic librarians can play to curb fake news? (Dollinger, 2017)

Sullivan (2019) reveals that in the United States, many workshops and conferences have been organized by library organizations to curb the menace. Some of these include; "Libraries in a Post-Truth World" (Phillips Academy, Andover, MA) and "Developing a Metadata Community Response in the Post-Truth Information Age" (DCMI), along with webinars on "Post-Truth: Fake News and a New Era of Information Literacy" (ALA), "Don't Get Faked Out by the News" (AASL), and "Confronting Misinformation: How Librarians Can Assist Patrons in the Digital Information Age" (FDLP).

With issues arising from the 2016 U.S. elections, some information schools in the U.S. established centers to help control fake news in the 2020 elections. For instance, the University of Washington Information School established the Center for an Informed Public (CIP) in 2019 to resist strategic misinformation and to promote an informed public. Since its establishment, it has collaborated with public libraries in Seattle to start the community labs in public libraries project. This project seeks to use public libraries as community halls where community members can gather to discuss fake news and identify them. In 2020, the CIP organized lectures and radio sessions on misinformation (Young et al., 2021).

In the view of Sullivan (2019), the librarians' urge to join the campaign against fake news is not just a duty but an opportunity to prove their primary functions. However, on reflection, the librarians' role in curbing the fake news menace seems like a mirage due to a lack of control or authority of the Internet (Sullivan, 2019). Also, the indicators of information reliability are difficult to recognize with unscrupulous persons' ability to mimic reputable and authoritative sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Nonetheless, Sullivan (2019) reveals that information literacy is the proposed way to curb it. Ireland (2018) adds that when librarians teach information literacy in terms of the reliability of

Table 2. Summary of IFLA's guide on 'how to spot fake news'.

Step	Action	Activities
1	Consider the source	Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact information.
2	Read beyond	Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What is the whole story?
3	Check the author	Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?
4	Supporting sources?	Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.
5	Check the date	Reposting old news stories does not mean they are relevant to current events.
6	Is it a joke?	If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.
7	Check your biases	Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgment.
8	Ask the experts	Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

Source: IFLA (2017).

a publisher or an author, emphasis must also be placed on the authenticity of the sources of information that the author relied on. Batchelor (2017) also recommends teaching critical thinking skills during information literacy sessions. For Rose-Wiles et al. (2017), information literacy goals should be embedded in every course with librarians as co-instructors who will aid students to consciously practice information literacy concepts throughout their studies.

Conceptual framework

This study examines the readiness of academic librarians in Ghana to curb fake news using the IFLA guide on 'how to spot fake news'. Discussions about fake news has led to a new focus on media literacy skills and the role of libraries in providing these skills. According to IFLA (2017), a call for action was made on librarians to educate and advocate for critical thinking, which is a crucial skill when navigating the information society. With this in mind, IFLA created an eight (8) simple step infographic guide based on FactCheck.org's 2016 guide for understanding and identifying "fake news". The essence of this infographic by IFLA was to enable people to discover a given news piece's verifiability. In the view of IFLA (2017, p. 4), "the more we crowdsource our wisdom, the wiser the world becomes".

The first step of the infographic checklist stipulates that a person in search of information needs to consider the source. This sometimes requires clicking away from the story to investigate its mission, contact and other valuable information of the website. The second step postulates that consumers of information read beyond the headlines. The infographic suggests headlines can be outrageous and misleading in an effort to get

clicks, likes and readership. As such, it is usually prudent to read the entire story. The third step of the infographic is to check for the author. In so doing, the consumer of the information must conduct a quick background check on the author to ascertain their genuineness and credibility.

The fourth step requires that the user of the information searches for corroborating sources by clicking on those links to determine if the information churned out supports the story. The fifth step is to check the date to ascertain the currency of the information. In the view of IFLA, reposting old news stories does not mean they are relevant to current events. The sixth step is to confirm if it is not a joke. IFLA admonishes that it might be a satire if the story is too outlandish. It is, therefore, imperative to conduct a thorough search on the site and author to be certain.

The seventh step admonishes consumers of information to check their biases as this may make them fall for fake news. In so doing, an information user may need to consider their beliefs, which affects their judgment. The eighth step also admonishes that an individual can ask an expert such as a librarian or consults a fact-checking site when in doubt. Table 2 presents a summary of the guide.

Our interest in using this infographic guide lies in the eighth step, which recommends that when the consumer of information doubts some information, they consult an expert such as a librarian. However, the ability of a librarian to assist patrons in verifying information largely depends on their knowledge and understanding of the seven other steps as outlined in the infographic guide. Using the IFLA infographic guide as a tool in this study, we seek to explore academic librarians' readiness to curb fake news. We believe that when librarians are armed with knowledge on identifying "fake news", with

increased pressure on libraries as conduits for information literacy (De Paor & Heravi, 2020), academic librarians can turn back the tide to favor accurate news.

Methods

This section of the paper outlines the approach used in conducting the study. The research findings are based on interviews with staff of academic libraries in Ghana on their knowledge of fake news, how to identify them and how they can assist patrons in recognizing fake news. This research was exploratory and adopted a qualitative approach to explore the readiness of academic librarians in curbing fake news. According to Carlin (2008), qualitative research strives for a subjective understanding of a phenomenon from the point of view of the actor(s) directly involved. The qualitative methods were chosen to elicit depth and complexity, rather than generalizability.

The study focuses on academic libraries in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The decision to recruit all the academic libraries in the region was to get a holistic picture of the topic under investigation and because the number was adequate for the study's purposes. We also believe that findings from these institutions would give an empirical view of the understanding of fake news and the readiness of librarians in other institutions in Ghana to curb the spread of fake news.

At the time of the study, there were 12 fully accredited tertiary institutions across the Upper East Region of Ghana, comprising two teacher training colleges, six health training institutions, one technical university, two private universities and one public university. Each of the 12 institutions has an academic library managed by one or more librarians. In this study, reference library staff and head librarians comprising thirty-two (32) respondents across all the institutions were the study's target population. Our decision to use the entire population was justified considering the target population under study was too small to sample.

Considering this was a qualitative study, purposive sampling was adopted in recruiting all

reference library staff and head librarians from the various academic libraries. Creswell (2016) suggests that purposive sampling is appropriate for collecting detailed participants' views when the informants are very few and the information is hardly quantifiable. Head librarians facilitated the recruitment of library staff at the reference section to be interviewed. Except for four (4) persons, all persons interviewed either had a first degree or a Masters degree in Information Studies. Nonetheless, the four (4) other persons who did not have a certificate in Information or Library Studies had some form of in-service training from the Ghana Library Authority (GhLA). Besides, they had worked for more than five years in their respective institutional libraries, bringing their experience to bear on the subject matter. Out of all those interviewed, only one (1) person had less than 1-year of working experience in the library. The rest had between three (3) to sixteen (16) years of working experience.

The reference library staff of the various academic institutions were particularly targeted for this study because they play a pivotal role in guiding students and faculty at the reference desk. As the first point of call in the library, reference librarians apply critical-thinking skills, emotional intelligence, teaching ability and question analysis to connect patrons with appropriate information resources.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviews were conducted via telephone. Head librarians were contacted via phone or e-mail and permission was sought from them before the interviews were conducted with reference staff. Where a head librarian consents to their institutional library participating in the study, they are called and asked to provide contacts of reference library staff who agree to participate in the study. Some e-mail contacts were also retrieved from the Ghana Library Association (GLA) mailing list, while phone numbers were obtained from known colleagues. The nature of the study was comprehensively explained to prospective respondents and their consent to participate in the study was sought.

Qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews were analyzed using an interpretative approach. Gathered data (interview transcripts)

were transcribed, read and re-read. They were then uploaded to the Nvivo software (version 20) and analyzed thematically. Data analysis was through a deductive process that involved scrutinizing data collected through individual interviews in search of common meanings and patterns regarding the phenomenon under study. It began with the coding of data, sorting different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within identified themes (Nowell et al., 2017). The use of multiple researchers helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The emerging themes formed the basis of our findings and discussions. All the data gathered were analyzed to identify emerging approaches that academic libraries employ to assist patrons in recognizing fake news. These themes were compared with IFLA's guide on 'how to spot fake news'.

Findings

This section presents the findings from interviews conducted with participants (See [Appendix](#) for the interview guide). They are presented under three broad themes which capture the views of library staff who participated in the study. Quotes from participants are used to illustrate the emerging themes. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes, the institutions where the interviewees were drawn and interviewees' names are not mentioned.

The findings are presented under the following major themes:

- Academic Librarians Knowledge of Fake News
- Academic Librarians Knowledge on How to identify Fake News
- Role of Academic Librarians in Managing Fake News

Academic librarians knowledge of fake news

Academic librarians are supposed to be knowledgeable about issues of fake news since they have a responsibility to evaluate information resources for academic library collections and guide patrons to evaluate the information they consume (IFLA, 2017). Extant literature has sought to espouse the role of librarians in curbing the

growing menace of fake news (Batchelor, 2017; IFLA, 2017; Jacobson, 2017; Rose-Wiles, 2018; Sullivan, 2019; Young et al., 2021). Given this, we sought to find out academic librarians' views and a general understanding of the fake news phenomenon and their subjective experiences in their career as reference librarians while dealing with patrons regarding. We also sought to find out the types of fake news they were familiar with.

Responses to these questions revealed that librarians across all the institutions studied had some form of understanding of fake news. However, their views and perceptions were varied but similar. For instance, responding to the question: "What is your understanding of fake news?", a participant intimated:

I understand fake news to mean spreading wrong information to achieve a particular aim or to saturate the media space/information market to ensure that people do not get to know the right information ...

Other respondents shared similar views. For instance, one said:

Basically, fake news is about news that is put out in the public domain to mislead people. Usually, there is no evidence to back it up. Just news to deceive people.

And another also added that:

Fake news is a piece of information that is meant to mislead the public. This type of information usually suits the vested interests of a specific group of people.

The views of other participants were not far from the above responses. These responses suggest that librarians had some form of understanding of fake news. Their knowledge of fake news is synonymous to disinformation which is the deliberate spread of false information for an intended purpose.

To get a deeper understanding of respondents' knowledge of fake news, we sought to find out if respondents knew the types, motivation or complexity of fake news that exist. This was imperative because knowledge on the types, motivations or complexity of fake news puts the librarian in a better position to educate patrons on how to identify them effectively. From our findings, twenty-six (26) participants comprising the majority did not know any other types or

motivations of fake news except for political power or to be famous in the case of musicians.

In answering this question, the recurrent responses from most participants as a popular source of fake news was social media news. Only three (3) respondents identified clickbait as a type of fake news. From the above revelations, we believe that although librarians are aware of fake news, most are not very knowledgeable about the scope, intricacies and complexity of the fake news phenomenon. Our findings support the views of Lim (2020), who contends that librarians must further clarify the term fake news so that it reflects its multiple layers and complexity.

Knowledge on how to identify fake news

Librarians are responsible for managing a vast amount of information at their disposal. Discussions about fake news and the ubiquity of information technology have led to a new focus on information literacy, media literacy and critical thinking (Batchelor, 2017) and the role of libraries in providing training in these fields. Stemming from the above, librarians as experts according to the IFLA (2017) guide on 'how to spot fake news', must have the requisite knowledge, expertise and skill in identifying fake news. This is to enable them render support to their patrons.

To this end, participants were asked a series of questions on how to identify fake news. The IFLA proposed guide was used as a toolkit. We began by finding out from respondents if they knew or had a list of any known fake news sites or fact-checking sites. The idea here was to know if reference librarians could identify fake news by knowing which sites are purveyors of fake news. We were guided by the knowledge that fake news can appear on sites that do not appear on any list of known fake news sources and that some news sources may produce reliable as well as unreliable new stories. Strangely, participants' responses revealed that none of them were aware of any fake news sites or resources for identifying fake news.

We probed further to determine how as librarians, they evaluate new stories and sources for patrons. The IFLA guidelines suggest that an information user must consider the source of information. In so doing, one must click away

from the story to investigate the site, its mission, and contact information. Other information evaluation mechanisms and criteria include but not limited to the following: C.R.A.A.P Test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose); P.R.O.V.E.N. Test (Relevance, Objectivity, Verifiability, Expertise, Newness); R.A.D.A.R Test (the Rationale, Authority, Date, Accuracy, Relevance); A.B.C.D test (Author, Biasness, Content, Date) and 5W's + 1H Test (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How).

However, responses from interviewees revealed that while all participants were aware of criteria such as determining the source and credibility of the author, all participants were unaware of the evaluative guide or criteria stated above for identifying fake news, including the most common guide developed by IFLA. When the various checklist and evaluative criteria were mentioned to them, only six (6) out of the 32 participants confirmed that they had heard of the IFLA's guide on identifying fake news. However, they could not tell its content. One respondent had this to say:

For online information, I usually identify fake news using the domain name of the website. For instance, websites with domain name ".edu" are educational sites and so are more credible than websites that end with ".com" which in my view are mostly commercial websites.

Another participant also pointed:

I confirm whether other sources are reporting the same thing, in which case I can arrive at a conclusion as to whether it is fake or not.

A recurring view from twenty (20) respondents was that the print media was a more authentic source. In the words of one participant:

Most fake news comes from online sources because they can easily be deleted and manipulated.

Lastly, we sought to find out if these institutional libraries had developed any standardized toolkits to help patrons identify fake news. This question revealed that none of the institutions studied had such in-house toolkit to assist patrons. In most respondents' views (28 out of the 32 participants), students barely even visited the library to authenticate or verify news sources. For instance, a respondent had this to say:

Table 3. Some responses from participants on the role of librarians in curbing fake news.

Responses
<i>"Library professionals should sit together to brainstorm on measures to adopt in fighting fake news."</i>
<i>"Library professionals should be proactive in dealing with patrons since most of them do not often visit the library to verify news. One way is by circulating tips on ways of identifying fake news via students' social media platforms like WhatsApp. The school's library website could also be used as a conduit for awareness creation and librarians made to lead the charge."</i>
<i>"Patrons should be educated on how to evaluate information before spreading them through social media. The library should organize information literacy training programmes and workshops."</i>
<i>"A topic on fake news should be an essential part of the Information Literacy curriculum and librarians made to teach students on how to identify fake news. There must be collaborations among libraries and other institutions like social media organizations on software and skills available on identifying fakes."</i>

This is something we have never even contemplated about as a department. Possibly because we do not even have students coming into the library to verify news sources.

Another respondent intimated that:

The library per say does not have one but where there is the need I use my discretion to help such patrons decipher if a particular news item is fake or not."

It also emerged from our interviews with the librarians that none of the institutions had software tools such as site browser plug-ins that alert users to unreliable news sources. This probably is as a result of the fact that librarians interviewed do not even know such tools exist to help identify fake news.

Role of academic librarians in managing fake news

As trained experts in evaluating information, academic librarians are positioned to lead in the campaign against fake news (Batchelor, 2017; IFLA, 2017; Jacobson, 2017; Rose-Wiles, 2018; Sullivan, 2019; Young et al., 2021). Accordingly, this paper was interested in finding out from participants the role academic librarians can play in curbing fake news during a time when such skills are urgently required. Specifically, we asked questions on how academic librarians could assist patrons in identifying fake news, topics that should be of priority, the current capacity of librarians and their libraries in terms of skills, resources and services. Table 3 captures the views of 5 respondents regarding strategies that academic librarians could adopt in curbing the fake news menace. These responses vividly capture the recurring suggestions proposed by all the participants of the study.

Despite these submissions on the role librarians can play in curbing fake news, further

enquiry from the librarians on whether they organized any information literacy sessions for members of faculty and students revealed that only two (2) out of the 12 academic libraries studied carried out information literacy instructions as a means of educating their patrons on how to do scholarly research. But this is only for a semester and for first year students alone.

On a larger perspective, the lack of information literacy sessions in 10 out of 12 libraries is a major source of concern. The concern is not just about fake news discovery and prevention but the wider scope of introducing patrons to the discovery and consumption of wholesome information. As a fundamental, the library through periodic information literacy sessions should introduce students to library resources, services, and material organization. The changing landscape of information delivery has made it even more compelling for the integration of information literacy in higher education. The lack of instruction of information literacy in these 10 institutions is, therefore, problematic.

The integration of information literacy instruction into the formal curriculum has become an accepted practice in higher education (Tang, 2018; Torrell, 2020; White, 2021). If the fight against fake news is to succeed, then the investigated institutions must as a necessity redesign curriculum to integrate information literacy instruction as a base course in all programmes. This call must be spearheaded by the library in collaboration with faculty by developing new approaches and learning resources to improve the Information Literacy competencies of students. As suggested by Franklin et al. (2021), teaching librarians and faculty must collaborate to develop instructions aimed at integrating information literacy into undergraduate instructions to improve competencies of students.

Discussion and conclusion

Research has shown that the phenomenon of fake news is a global crisis and of concern to many countries and institutions (Batchelor, 2017). Ghana has had its fair share of the devastating effects of fake news, with many myths and untruths propagated by a myriad of traditional and social media outlets especially about the COVID-19 pandemic and during elections. This tends to make the impact of fake news deadlier and widespread than the COVID-19 pandemic itself. This calls for a concerted effort by all relevant stakeholders, including those in the information profession, especially librarians, since they play a pivotal role in evaluating print and/or digital information.

In an era where digital information abounds, many unresolved organizational, managerial and technical issues make the fight against fake news a daunting task for librarians globally. With the exponential increase in information (Barclay, 2017), careful consideration must be given to the issue of fake news within academic institutions since they serve as citadels for acquiring knowledge.

Fake news is even more dangerous for academic institutions since it can compromise and reduce the integrity of scholarly work if care is not taken. Academics must, therefore, be taught the requisite skill and knowledge in evaluating information for teaching, learning, research and other scholarly work. Against this backdrop, this present study sought to explore the readiness of academic librarians in curbing fake news from the perspective of librarians in selected Ghanaian academic libraries with the ultimate aim of identifying some of the prospects and challenges.

This study revealed that though academic librarians are aware of fake news, they do not grasp the phenomenon's complexity. Some were also unaware of the evaluation mechanisms and criteria available in identifying fake news as outlined by the IFLA guide on 'how to spot fake news'. Similarly, the study also revealed that some librarians who participated in the study were unaware of sites that are purveyors of fake news and some resources available for identifying fake news. This dearth of knowledge could possibly be attributed to the fact that librarians have not risen to the challenge of curbing this menace.

De Paor and Heravi (2020) argue that librarians have experienced some form of difficulty in advocating for information literacy instruction to be introduced in some institutions. Our findings confirm the above assertion of De Paor and Heravi (2020) as it was revealed that most of the academic libraries studied do not provide curricular avenues for librarians to teach media and information literacy skills. It also emerged that there were no standardized evaluation toolkits across the various institutions to support faculty and students in identifying fake news.

Despite these challenges identified from the study, it was very encouraging to see the efforts made through the recommendations made by respondents as to the role academic librarians can play in curbing fake news. Thus, it is our view that tremendous efforts are required to impress upon academic librarians to be proactive in helping faculty and students identify fake news. This is, however, dependent on acquiring the requisite tools, knowledge and skills.

It is our view that librarians must be creative in how they reimagine the types of literacies necessary to combat fake news. In view of the above, the following recommendations and strategies are being proffered to better position academic librarians in Ghana in curbing the menace of fake news. The study recommends that academic librarians should be given adequate and regular on-the-job training on fake news. Managers of academic libraries should create opportunities for all library staff, especially reference librarians, to attend workshops and seminars on such themes. As a first step, librarians could be taken through series of video tutorials which will enable them to identify fake news.

In the same vein, the Library and Information Studies departments of universities in Ghana should review their curriculum to include training and education on fake news. This could be teased out as a sub-topic in the information sources, literacy and retrieval curriculum.

De Paor and Heravi (2020) and Rose-Wiles et al. (2017) assert that information literacy instructions, media literacy, and critical thinking should be regarded as essential functions and addressed by librarians. This suggests that academic libraries have to intensify their information

literacy lessons and look at creative and practical teaching methods. Therefore, the study recommends that librarians collaborate with faculty and their ICT departments to develop media and information literacy modules with well-established goals and objectives. These modules should set aside a criterion for instruction and evaluation by academic librarians. The module should have two interrelated goals and learning outcomes. The first is to equip students with the skills to become literate and responsible consumers of information. The second goal is for them to be responsible sharers of information to minimize the spread of misinformation.

Implications of the study

Fake news requires the efforts of all to curb it. However, academic librarians have a frontline duty in assisting faculty and students in identifying fake news. With the wealth of information resources on the internet, the role of librarians keeps evolving each day. Library professionals who are only stuck to the traditional role of recording, organizing, storing, preserving, retrieving, and disseminating information resources for patrons may soon be without jobs. The idea is about adding value to the profession and taking up new roles as watchdogs in this era of information explosion. The information market is very competitive and this calls for aggressive education from information professionals regarding issues of concern such as fake news. Thus, the findings from this research should inform academic librarians to conduct rigorous studies on the subject of fake news and educate their patrons. The paper further underscores the critical role of librarians as experts in curbing the fake news menace. It contributes to scholarly literature on the role of academic librarians in the campaign against fake news within the Ghanaian landscape and highlights the prospects and challenges in curbing this menace. Though our research concentrated on one region in Ghana, the findings and recommendations should be of great value to academic libraries in other parts of Ghana and the larger research community.

Limitation and suggestions for further studies

This article's limitation is inherent in its coverage. The study covered academic libraries in one region. Thus, we recommend that future studies consider a comparative study of academic libraries across the country to allow for acceptable levels of generalizing the findings. Also, this study adopted a qualitative approach to the collection and analysis of data. Possible future studies could adopt a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach to get an indepth view on the awareness and effect of fake news on academic work in tertiary institutions. Since students and faculty are directly affected by the consumption of fake news, they should thus be included in the study to seek their views on the subject matter.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Dear Colleague,

This interview guide seeks to elicit information from you on the “Readiness of Academic Librarians in Curbing Fake News”. We are convinced that academic librarians play a vital and mediating role in raising awareness of fake news and should be aware of the strategies and frameworks that could be deployed to support faculty and students information needs. You have been selected as a voluntary participant in this study with your prior consent. We shall, therefore, be very grateful if you could spare a few minutes to answer the questions posed to the best of your ability. Please be assured that your responses to the questions will be kept confidential and will be used solely for the purpose of this research. You have the option to discontinue as a participant as and when you deem necessary. Although interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes, no personal identifiers will be used in transcripts.

Your co-operation is fully appreciated.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Researchers

Section A: Respondent's background information

1. How long have you been working in your institution's library?
2. What is your highest level of education?
3. Do you have any professional qualification in Information Studies/Library Studies? (Probe: What professional qualification did you acquire?)

Section B: Librarians general knowledge of fake news

4. What is your understanding of fake news?
5. Have you ever encountered a situation where you were confronted with fake news in your career as a reference librarian? How did you discover it was fake news, and how did you deal with it?
6. Do you encounter situations where students come to the library to verify news sources? If yes, could you cite some instances?
7. How did you address their concerns? Were they satisfied with how you addressed their concerns?
8. Do you know the types of fake news? If yes, could you kindly mention some examples of fake news you are very much aware of (e.g. clickbait, sponsored content, fabricated journalism etc.).
9. Among these types of fake news, which common one(s) do you mostly have some of your students coming to the library to verify?

Section C: Librarians knowledge on how to spot fake news

10. Can you identify fake news if you spotted one as a reference librarian? (Probe: Do you know or have a list of any known fake news sites? (Prompt: The idea here is to know if reference librarians can identify fake news by knowing which sites are purveyors of fake news keeping in mind that fake news can appear on sites that do not appear on any list of known fake news sources and that some news sources may produce reliable as well as unreliable news).)
11. How do you evaluate news stories and news sources for patrons as a reference librarian? (Probe: Which of these "checklists" or "criteria" are you familiar with and which do you consider when assessing a news story when students confront you? (e.g.
 - a. The C.R.A.A.P Test-Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose,
 - b. The P.R.O.V.E.N. Test-Purpose, Relevance, Objectivity, Verifiability, Expertise, Newness
 - c. IFLA's checklist on how to spot fake news
 - d. R.A.D.A.R Test-Rationale, Authority, Data, Appearance and Reputation
 - e. A.B.C.D Evaluation Checklist-Author, Bias, Content, Date

- f. 5W's + 1H Evaluation Checklist-Who, What, When, Where, Why and How
- g. S.M.E.L.L Test- Evaluation Form-Source, Motivation, Evidence, Logic, Left out

12. Has your institution developed any tools or cites (e.g. browser plug-ins, B.S. Detector, This is Fake) to label or identify fake news, stories and sources? (Probe: If yes, do your users patronize them? How successful and effective have been such tools in assisting your users/patrons identify fake news they may come across? Do your users trust them? If No, why?).

Section D: Role of academic librarians in managing fake news

13. In your opinion, can libraries play a vital or mediating role in helping faculty and students identify misinformation or fake news? (Probe: If yes, do academic librarians have any tangible roles to play in educating patrons on how to evaluate information and spot misinformation? In your view, are these roles to be preventive or damage control measures? How do reference librarians proceed on this?).
14. What topics are likely to be the focus of fake news? (Probe: Why are some topics better than others? What makes a topic a good choice for fake news? What kind of details needs to be included? What kind of details would probably be left out?)
15. How equipped is your library in terms of resources (software and apps) to help your patrons identify fake news?
16. How would you rate your information literacy skills? What requisite skills and knowledge as a reference librarian do you have to aid your patrons in identifying fake news?

What programmes or courses are taught by your institution's library to enable faculty and students to identify fake news? (e.g. instructional research sessions, one-on-one reference assistance, web-based subject and course-specific LibGuides, teaching new information literacy concepts). If yes, do you teach your patrons about them? How effective are these programmes or courses? What is the outcome on patrons based on any assessment modules you may have?

Please do you have any closing comments for me?

END OF INTERVIEW

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION.