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The fake news wave: Academic libraries' battle against misinformation during COVID-19

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Fake news
Infodemic
COVID-19
Information literacy
LibGuides
Websites

ABSTRACT

This study employed qualitative research methods to establish the contribution of academic libraries to the fight against fake news in South Africa. The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted to the explosion of fake news in social media platforms and other Internet sites to the detriment of efforts to curb the spread of the disease. With encouragement from library associations and other library bodies and as custodians of information, academic librarians have had no choice but to contribute to the fight against the infodemic including by raising awareness, providing credible information, collection development and research support, and through sharing best practice in conferences and other forums. The results of this study affirm the role of libraries in South Africa and other countries in the fight against fake news. This study brought the perspective of the global South to the discourse about fake news and outlined the responses of academic libraries to the COVID-19 infodemic. The results of this study are an affirmation of the role played by libraries in the fight against fake news in general and specifically during times of crises.

Introduction

Fake news is probably as old as the time when human beings started to live in social settings (Burkhardt, 2017). The Book of Genesis in the Bible, for example, tells a story of how Adam and Eve were fed fabricated information by the “crafty serpent” in order to disobey God's instructions (Jammieson, 2018). Fake news will probably be with us for as long as humankind live in social settings. There are many reasons why people manufacture and/or spread fake news, including gaining power, stimulating debates, misleading, gaining popularity, as satire or out of plain gullibility and ignorance. Burkhardt (2017) submits that the manufacture and spread of fake news has gone through phases of metamorphosis from the days of the pre-printing press, to the printing press and now the age of social media and the Internet.

The biggest change in the 21st century has been the way fake news is produced, stored and transmitted and the speed with which it travels the world (Mc Gonagle, 2017). There is general consensus among commentators that technologies such as the Internet and social media are the main reason why this phenomenon has become so pervasive in contemporary society (Alemanno, 2018). Technologies, therefore, are the biggest enablers of fake news (De Paor & Heravi, 2020).

Fake news can be a threat to democracies (Lee, 2019). It can lead to unnecessary conflicts or fuel already brewing conflicts. The sporadic attacks on African immigrants in South Africa, for example, are said to be fuelled mainly by fake news (Chenzi, 2020). With the Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, a realisation has been reached that fake news can threaten the general health of the society (Ahinkorah et al., 2020; Chisita, 2020; Durodolu et al., 2021; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020a).

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a relatively newly discovered type of coronavirus (World Health Organisation, 2020b). Most people infected with COVID-19 present with mild to moderate symptoms and recover without any treatment. A large number of people remain asymptomatic and recover without even realising that they were infected with the virus (WHO, 2020b). The virus has caused unprecedented disruption to the human society's way of life. People's lives and livelihoods have been affected and the educational, socio-economic and health systems of countries have been put under strain (Ebrahim, 2020). Although some vaccines have been developed, there is currently no cure for COVID-19. The only effective prescription offered by WHO (2020a, 2020b) and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2020a) is for people to be informed so that they can take the necessary precautionary measures to minimise the risk of infection.

Access to trustworthy information, therefore, remains the most effective weapon in the fight against COVID-19 (WHO, 2020c).
health professionals involved in research against the disease need credible information to conduct research. Authorities require reliable information to make the best decisions. The society at large needs access to authentic information resources to minimise the risk of infection.

However, the current information environment is polluted by huge amounts of incorrect information (WHO, 2020c). The uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 has provided the best opportunity for the purveyors of fake news to manufacture conspiracy theories and spread rumours about the disease. This had an effect of causing confusion and mistrust in the general populace which can derail governments’ efforts to fight the disease and result to unnecessary deaths (Ahinkorah et al., 2020; Chukwuere et al., 2020).

In the case of South Africa, this was further exacerbated by the high levels of functional illiteracy and the multilingual nature of the country (Aitchison, 2016). According to the African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA) (2020), Babalola et al. (2020) and Chukwuere et al. (2020), misinformation thrives where there is illiteracy. Therefore, AfLIA requested librarians to educate themselves about the disease before passing information to the public. AfLIA further tasked librarians with repackaging information into local languages to avoid excluding those who do not understand the dominant official languages of their countries. Although only 9.6% of South Africans consider themselves as English first language speakers (Statistics South Africa, 2011), most of the information about the disease is conveyed in English with little or no consideration for the African languages. Piller et al. (2020) caution that communicating COVID-19 related information (almost) exclusively in the English language in multilingual environments often results to large-scale exclusion of large parts of the society. These communities miss out on getting credible information from the authorities which may leave them vulnerable to concocted news. In this climate, libraries have had to respond (Yu & Mani, 2020). Crowster (2020) and Wang and Lund (2020) challenge librarians to play a critical role in curbing the spread of fake news during COVID-19.

The purpose of this preliminary study is to provide an overview of the contribution of academic libraries to the fight against fake news in South Africa. As a preliminary study, this study is not an exhaustive appraisal of the role of academic libraries in the fight against fake news, it provides a foundation for additional scholarship in the area.

Fake news, in the context of this paper refers to the invention and distribution of false or incorrect information as credible information. This study uses fake news and infodemic interchangeably. It borrows from Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) to use these as umbrella terms for all information disorders including misinformation, disinformation, mal-information and pseudo-science.

This study contributes to the limited but growing body of knowledge on the role of libraries in the fight against fake news. It brings the perspective of a country from the global South to this important discourse. The section below outlines the context within which this study took place.

The nature of COVID-19 fake news in South Africa

COVID-19 took some months before it was confirmed to have migrated to South Africa (Bird & Smith, 2020). Because of that, some South Africans thought that COVID-19 was not real. The disease was dismissed as scaremongering by the Central Intelligence Agency (Bird & Smith, 2020).

When the virus finally arrived in the country some felt it was a white man’s disease that could not infect Africans due to their stronger immune systems (Africa Check, 2020; Ebrahim, 2020; Steyn, 2020). This myth would later be disproved as many South Africans fell ill and succumbed to the disease. Another myth which was also reported by respectable publications was that the virus had its origins from South Africa rather than Wuhan in China as initially reported. According to Grobler (2020), this originated from a quotation made by Audrey Delsink (HIS-Africa’s wildlife director) that was taken out-of-context by the United Kingdom’s Daily Express newspaper. This quotation was later reported by at least one South African publication (Grobler, 2020).

Emotions ran high on South African social media when it was reported that Bill Gates intended to test a vaccine to Africans first before it could be used to Europeans (Medical Brief, 2020a). This came at the back of unpalatable comments made by two French doctors who implied that Africans be treated as the “West’s guinea pig” for COVID-19 vaccine trials (Medical Brief, 2020b).

Another conspiracy doing the rounds was a video of a man warning South Africans about COVID-19 test kits that were apparently contaminated with the disease (Citizen reporter and News24 Wire, 2020). South Africans were warned to refuse any test for COVID-19 as this was a way to spread the virus. As a result, many people are said to have refused to be tested for COVID-19. This prompted government to issue a fake news alert (see Fig. 1) and the man was arrested for inventing and distributing fake news.

On 07 April 2020, a post went out on Facebook claiming that the President of the Republic South Africa requested all foreign nationals to leave so that the country could take care of its bona fide citizens as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed. According to Chenzi (2020), posts of this nature were meant to cause conflict between South Africans and foreign nationals.

Perhaps as a result of failure of Western medicine to come-up with better solutions, local indigenous medicines were used to treat the virus. The most popular traditional medicine was the Artemisia afra (Umhlo/nyane/lengana/zengana in some indigenous languages) which is often used to treat respiratory ailments by traditional communities in South Africa (Feni & Khoza, 2020). Repeated warnings against the use of the traditional plant by authorities did not yield the desired results especially when it had the support of prominent trade unionist Mr. Zwelinzima Vavi and the Madagascar President, Andry Rajoelina, among others. The popularity of this traditional medicine to treat COVID-19 ailments has caught the eye of scientists in the country. Government has released funds to examine its efficacy (Medical Brief, 2020b). The fact that Africans resorted to traditional medicines should not come as a surprise. Maluleka and Ngoepe (2019) and Poorna et al. (2014) cite WHO as indicating that the majority of people in developing countries still rely on traditional medicines for their primary healthcare.

South African based pastors are known for making outrageous claims to...
Published LIS research on fake news rely heavily on how IL skills can help curb the disease (Auberry, 2018; De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Durodolu & Ibenne, 2020; Musgrove et al., 2018; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018). There are also studies on the use of LibGuides and library websites to raise awareness (Auberry, 2018; Lim, 2020; Musgrove et al., 2018; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018; Yu & Mani, 2020), the various evaluation criteria and tools developed by librarians to identify fake news (Auberry, 2018; Lim, 2020; Musgrove et al., 2018; Neely-Sardon & Tignor, 2018), the role of libraries in minimising the impact of fake news (Ali & Gatti, 2020; Bhati, 2020; Yuvaraj, 2020), and lately how libraries have adapted their services to continue assisting students and researchers to find authentic and reliable information sources during the COVID-19 enforced lockdowns (Ali & Gatti, 2020; Babalola et al., 2020; Chisita, 2020; De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Durodolu et al., 2021; Durodolu & Ibenne, 2020; Ladan et al., 2020; Okike, 2020; Yuvaraj, 2020).

Auberry (2018) and Neely-Sardon and Tignor (2018) reports an initiative of librarians at the Indian River State College in the United States that involved the development of a news literacy instruction program that was offered to library users. The most important outcome of this program was the development of a fake news evaluation tool called RADAR (Rationale, Authority, Date, Accuracy and Relevancy) which the authors concede is the adopted version of CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) which was developed by the California State University Library. The course is offered to both students and faculty alike. Auberry (2018) further reports that the programme was embedded into the students’ Learning Management System (LMS) of the university to allow students to learn at their own pace and time.

Musgrove et al. (2018) is of the view that students struggle to identify fake news due to inherent cognitive biases. However, the authors contend that teaching students information literacy and using various evaluation criteria (such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions’ (IFLA), 2017 infographic on how to spot fake news, CRAAP and RADAR) as well as directing users to authentic sources of information via LibGuides and websites could be one of the solutions.

LibGuides play a major role in the strategy of librarians to create awareness about fake news as well as provide access to authentic information sources. Lim’s (2020) contribution to the study of fake news was to analyse information in 21 anti-fake news LibGuides worldwide. Lim found that the majority of LibGuides emphasised the use of evaluation tools (checklists) to identify fake news. Only a few of the LibGuides put forth the influence of psychological factors when interpreting news. This is an omission that Lim felt should be addressed. LibGuides played a critical role by providing instructional resources for evaluating information and fact-checking.

In reviewing literature on information literacy and fakes news, De Paor and Heravi (2020) recommends that due to the scale of the fake news problem in the 21st century, librarians will need to re-evaluate some of their values and positions by reflecting an anti-fake news bias in their collection development practices. That way they will ensure that people access only authentic information resources in libraries. Additionally, IL will have to be reframed to reflect this new anti-fake news stance. Yuvaraj (2020) concurs pointing out that librarians in the UK have been “generating awareness, filtering fake information, supporting researchers and faculty members, (to) providing reference and document delivery services.”

From developing country perspectives, Bhati (2020); Chisita (2020); Durodolu & Ibenne (2020); Durodolu et al. (2021) and Okike (2020) are of the view that, like elsewhere, librarians should continue providing high quality resources to the general public. This strategy was found to be effective in Pakistan where health librarians continued to provide these resources during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ali & Gatti, 2020). Ali and Gatti (2020) submits that during COVID-19 the role of Pakistani health librarians was to provide reliable information, research support, advice against fake news and continuing to maintain the core library services. Durodolu et al. (2021) are of the view that imparting information literacy skills can help minimise the risk of fake news. LIS studies reveal that librarians have relied on information literacy, websites, LibGuides and evaluation tools to fight fake news.

Although there is a proliferation of studies about the role of libraries in dealing with fake news worldwide, very few of those emanate from Africa and other continents. The literature is dominated by studies from the Western world. This could be attributed to the fact that the fake news discourse was initially framed around the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq, Brexit and the 2016 United States presidential election. These events were not perceived to have direct effect to the developing world as a result there is little evidence in literature on what the libraries in developing countries are doing against fake news. The COVID-19 fake news which affects all regions of the world has offered a platform for librarians in other countries to enter the fake news discourse.

Methodology

This qualitative study relied on literature review and content analysis of websites and LibGuides of public universities in South Africa. The study further draws from the lived experiences of the author during this period. The websites of all 26 South African public university libraries were visited in July and August 2020. South Africa was at its peak of the first wave of COVID-19 infections during those two months. The landing pages of the university libraries’ websites were gleaned for any signs of free COVID-19 resources and information. Thereafter, searches were conducted using the keywords “COVID-19”, “COVID-19 and (fake news or infodemic)”, and “fake news or infodemic”. This was to determine if each of those websites contained information on: (1) free COVID-19 resources (2) Fake news or infodemic as it relates to COVID-19 (3) fake news or infodemic information generally. Upon realising that most of the information on fake news was on LibGuides, the researcher then visited the LibGuides of all (eighteen) universities that subscribe to these platforms and repeated similar searches in that environment. The landing pages of the universities proved to be a rich source of data for free COVID-19 resources while the LibGuides provided most of the data about fake news or infodemic. This study is not the first study to utilise university websites and LibGuides as sources of data on the contribution of libraries to the fight against fake news. It is preceded by Lim’s (2020) and Yu and Mani’s (2020) studies.

Searches were also conducted on EbscoHost, Science Direct, SA ePublications, Scopus, Web-of-Science and Google Scholar using the following keywords: “fake news and libraries”, “fake news and South Africa”, “fake news and COVID-19”, “fake news and libraries and South Africa”, and “fake news and COVID-19 and libraries and South Africa”. This yielded a satisfactory number of relevant results although the results for “fake news and libraries and South Africa”, and “fake news and COVID-19 and libraries and South Africa” yielded two relevant papers that are cited in this study.

As there is still a limited number of scholarly publications in this research area, in some instances the study relied heavily on Internet as a source of information.
Findings

Evidence shows that academic libraries in South Africa have relied on several strategies to battle COVID-19 fake news including provision of quality and credible information, Information and Media Literacy (IL) instruction, and creating awareness about fake news. Other strategies include engaging in professional learning, such as attending or presenting in seminars and conferences, as well as collection development.

Provision of quality and credible information about COVID-19

Libraries in South Africa have used their websites and LibGuides to provide and promote access to quality and credible COVID-19 resources and information (Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA, 2020). Among others, the Universities of: Stellenbosch, Pretoria and Cape Town, have set-up LibGuides dedicated to providing current information about COVID-19. These LibGuides link to free electronic material such as books, journals and websites such as the South African government website that provides credible information about COVID-19. The LibGuides also provide information about the virtual services provided by the libraries during this period. There are also real time updates about COVID-19 news and statistics. These LibGuides have been exceptionally popular as shown by the statistics generated. Fig. 2 below shows that the then 3 month old Stellenbosch University LibGuide for COVID-19 resources had already accumulated 4735 views by 03 August proving its popularity.

Websites of many university libraries in South Africa provide access to free COVID-19 resources as also confirmed by the 2020 CHELSA Survey. The websites of the universities of: Limpopo Library, Mpumalanga Library, Nelson Mandela Library, Pretoria Library, Rhodes Library, Witwatersrand Library and Zululand Library have links to free COVID-19 resources in their homepages. These include links to zero rated databases, free electronic books, and library e-resources concerning COVID-19.

Information and media literacy instruction

Linked to the provision of quality and credible information about COVID-19 is capacitating users to be able to find the information independently. The provision of online training, often anchored on ways to find credible information sources, continued during the COVID-19 enforced lockdown period. Among others, a statement at the University of Pretoria's Library website, issued on 26 March 2020, confirms that remote instruction (information literacy training) continued at that university during this period (Matzirofa, 2020). Similarly, a statement was issued at the Stellenbosch University in various LibGuides and the library website to inform users that information literacy, research support and other services was to be transferred to an online environment from 31 March 2020 (Bruton, 2020). The Stellenbosch University, continued with its #SmartResearcher workshops from May 2020. The University of Johannesburg’s website listed online training that was offered via MS Teams during this period.

A survey conducted by the Committee of Higher Education Libraries of South Africa (CHELSA) serves as testament to the continuation of IL training during the COVID-19 enforced lockdown period in the country. According to the 2020 CHELSA Survey, 18 public university libraries in South Africa continued to provide IL support to students and researchers between 04 and 15 June 2020. Eleven institutions indicated that they continued to provide online information literacy training including ways of evaluating information and avoiding plagiarism.

From 27 March until 27 July 2020, SU librarians had collectively offered IL training to 144 groups of students and researchers. This ensured that clients were able to meet their curricular and research needs online. The training also came in time for them to learn new skills that would put them a step ahead in dealing with the COVID-19 infodemic.

Creating awareness about fake news

Various South African academic libraries warn clients about the harmful effects of fake news and also provide links to tools that can help them spot fake news. As pointed out in the methodology, LibGuides seem to be a popular tool used by librarians for this purpose. South Africa had 1235 LibGuides spread across 18 public universities. Eight universities do not subscribe to these tools. Table 1 provides a summary of all South African public university LibGuides that create awareness about fake news. There were 48 (4% of 1235) LibGuides that contain information about fake news. The South African LibGuides on fake news
Table 1 Coverage of fake news in South African public university LibGuides.

| South African Public University | LibGuide/s | Fake news coverage |
|---------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| UJ                              | Information Literacy Module: Tutorial 2: Evaluate information | Links to the information evaluation criteria (CRAAP and video from Western Libraries) as well as IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| UJ                              | Digital Literacy: Tutorial 2: Verify online information | IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic and the information evaluation criteria (questions from Central Michigan University Libraries) are embedded. The LibGuide also links to a video about dangers of fake news by Stephanie Busari. |
| UJ                              | Humanities - Communication Studies: Evaluating Information | Provide a link to evaluating information using the CRAAP Test. |
| UJ                              | Humanities - Historical Studies LibGuide | IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic is embedded in this LibGuide. |
| UJ                              | Humanities - Religion Studies | Embeds the IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| Wits                            | Wits University Journalism and Media Studies: Fake News | Provides links to definitions of fake news (links to Wikipedia articles), identifying fake news/sources (links to eight sources including Proquest's how to identify fake news in 10 steps). The LibGuide provides links to fake news stories and fake news articles in South Africa. It links to interviews with prominent persons about fake news. |
| Wits                            | Open Access, A2K & Scholarly Communication: Predatory Publishers | Provides links to fake news articles including an article by Dustin Ballard titled “Medically clear: fake news thrives in medicine” written in 2017. |
| Wits                            | TTP: targeting talent information literacy sessions: grade 11 session 1: libraries of the 21st century | Video on how to evaluate articles for signs of fake news embedded. |
| Wits                            | African literature | IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic is embedded. |
| Wits                            | William Cullen Library: Africana | Embeds IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| University of Pretoria (UP)     | Nursing Sciences: Evaluation of Website Resources | Links to information about how to identify fake news. |
| UP                              | Research Guide: COVID-19 Updates and Information | Toasts the South African government's COVID-19 website as a credible source of information to bust fake news. |
| UP                              | Music: COVID-19 and the Music Library | This LibGuide links to the South African government's COVID-19 website and prescribes it as a credible source of information to bust fake news. |
| DUT                             | Ecotourism Management - PMB: COVID-19 news Management - PMB Human Resource Management - PMB Public Relations Management (PMB) Public Management - PMB | These LibGuides provide awareness about the COVID-19 fake news, provide links to COVID-19 resources, embeds the South African government's website on COVID-19 myth busting, and embeds the IFLA's how to spot fake news infographic. |

Table 1 (continued)

| South African Public University | LibGuide/s | Fake news coverage |
|---------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
|                                 | Accounting - PMB Business and Information Management PMB Business Administration (PMB) Business Communication & Information Literacy (BCIL) PMB Human Resource Management - PMB Consumer Science: Food & Nutrition Chemistry Horticulture Sport Food Technology Biotechnology Clothing Management Maritime Studies Civil Engineering - PMB | These LibGuides embed the IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| DUT                             | Human Resource Management - PMB Nursing -PMB Textile Technology Architectural Technology Town & Regional planning Business Communication and Information Literacy 2020 Human Resource Management - PMB | These LibGuides embed the IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| UCT                             | Education Library Guide: Web Resources | Links to a lesson plan on how to teach students about fake news and a fake news evaluation website. |
|                                 | Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice: Internet Resources Finance and Tax Library Guide: Internet resources Professional Communication Library Guide: Internet Resources Entrepreneurship Library Guide: Evaluating Internet Resources Information Systems Library Guide: Internet Resources | These UCT LibGuides link to the CRAAP evaluation tool and IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic. |
| SU                              | Economics: Academic Discourse 2020 | Provides students with keywords when searching for information about fake news for their assignment/s. The LibGuide also provides links to suggested readings for the students. |
|                                 | Find, access and use information effectively: a step-by-step guide: Evaluate Information | Links to IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic and CRAAP and other evaluation websites. |
| University of the Western Cape | Law Guide: Fake News | The LibGuide provides information on why fake news must be fought, fake news categories are outlined and various evaluation tools and techniques are offered. |

can be divided into two broad categories, 1) those that seek to respond to COVID-19 fake news specifically and 2) those that seek to respond to fake news in general.

Among those that seek to respond to COVID-19 fake news are: the University of Johannesburg’s (UJ) “Digital Literacy: Tutorial 2: Verify Online Information” LibGuide which refers users to the IFLA’s “How to spot fake news – COVID-19 edition” infographic. There is also a link to a video that talks about the harmful effects of fake news. Five other UJ LibGuides also link to this infographic. Those are the: Humanities -
Communication Studies LibGuide, Humanities - Historical Studies LibGuide, Humanities - Postgraduate and Research Support LibGuide and the Humanities - Religion Studies. The six UJ LibGuides also provide information specifically about COVID-19 with three of them further providing links to published articles that talk about fake news during the COVID-19. The Durban University of Technology (DUT) boosts the largest concentration of LibGuides that contain fake news information with 26 of those. One of the LibGuides at DUT, Ecotourism Management - PMB: COVID-19 news, focus specifically on fake news in relation to COVID-19. The introduction to the “COVID-19 – Fake News (guideline)” of this LibGuide warns that “fake news about COVID-19 can be even more dangerous than the virus itself as this can lead to panic buying, sinophobia and xenophobic attacks”. Similarly, the UP’s Research Guide: COVID-19 Updates and Information LibGuide warns researchers to stay abreast of COVID-19 developments to avoid falling prey to fake news. Both LibGuides also affirm the sharing of credible information in the fight against fake news.

Other LibGuides in South Africa tackle fake news, generally, although the information is applicable to the fight against COVID-19 fake news. Six LibGuides at UCT tackle fake news as a challenge in using Internet resources. Those are the: Education Library LibGuide, Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice, Finance and Tax Library Guide, Professional Communication Library Guide, Entrepreneurship Library Guide and Information Systems Library Guide. Only one of those LibGuides, the Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice, also provide links to COVID-19 resources. The “Wits University Journalism and Media Studies: Fake News” LibGuide is perhaps the most comprehensive of all anti-fake news LibGuides in the country. The LibGuide provides links to websites that define the term, articles about fake news, tools for identifying fake news, fake news from the perspective of South Africa and libraries in the post-truth era. However, the LibGuide does not add any information about COVID-19 fake news preferring to deal with the subject in general terms.

Essentially, South African LibGuides with information on fake news contain links to: anti-fake news information, evaluation of websites using various tools, COVID-19 anti-fake news websites, and the IFLA’s “how to Spot fake news” tool (either the COVID-19 edition or the old one). The majority (44 out of 48) of LibGuides link to IFLA’s how to spot fake news infographic in its general or COVID-19 edition form, followed by links to CRAAP (18). Links to anti-fake news videos are also popular appearing to 7 LibGuides.

Very few libraries show evidence of developing content in their LibGuides, meaning that they link to content that already exists in other sources. The DUT’s Architectural Technology: Information Literacy and the Town & Regional planning: Academic Literacy 101 LibGuides link to a presentation on “topic analysis and fake news”. This presentation can prove to be a good model for how to directly link IL to fake news. Other LibGuides that show evidence of developing new content are the SU’s Economics: Academic Discourse 2020 and the UCT’s Education Library Guide: Web Resources. The former provides students with keywords to use when searching for fake news information for their assignment/s and also provides links to suggested readings for the students while the later provides a lesson plan on how to teach students about fake news.

Other strategies used by academic librarians

Some evidence exists that participating in professional learning and collection development are the other strategies used by librarians in South Africa to counter fake news.

Participation in professional learning

Internationally, the fight against fake news involves the publication of papers, organising conferences, presenting conference papers, webinars and other discussion forums. Fake news can be implied in one of the subthemes of a conference or it can be the main focus of the conference. UNESCO (2020a), for example, organised a webinar in Abuja, Nigeria to discuss COVID-19 fake news and the various strategies employed in different regions of the world to counter them.

During the COVID-19 period, the UN’s Dag Hammarskjöld Library hosted a webinar on “the contribution of libraries to the fight against misinformation” where Ms. Ellen Tise of the Stellenbosch University Library presented (UN’s Dag Hammarskjöld Library, 2020). Another notable webinar on fake news during this period was hosted by the University of Johannesburg from 07 to 08 September. The webinar sought to assist teacher librarians come to grips with the digital literacy skills required to fight COVID-19 misinformation.

Prior-COVID 19, a number of conferences were organised in South Africa where papers on fake news were accepted. One of the guest speakers at the International Conference on Information Literacy (ICIL) held at the North-West University spoke about “information literacy in a post-truth era” where she underlined the value of thinking critically about information due to rampant fake news (Kurbanoglu, 2019). Another paper on “Addressing information literacy in an academic literacy classroom: exploring fake news” was read from one of the parallel sessions of the ICIL conference by Olivier and Nel (2019).

Collection development

There are two ways that libraries utilise collection development to address fake news. Those are through purchasing fake news books to support research in this area and through purchasing credible material.

When navigating LibGuides from different universities the author of this article found titles of anti-fake news books among the new book lists of some institutions. The Quality Journal: Predatory Conferences LibGuide of the University of South Africa and the Information Science LibGuide of the University of Pretoria are some of the LibGuides that list books about fake news as part of their new purchases.

Library catalogues of universities also produced anti-fake news titles. These are but some of the examples of the contribution of university libraries in the anti-fake news agenda through collection development and research support.

Discussions

The results of this study reflected that academic libraries in South Africa provided high-quality information to off-set the effects of COVID-19 related fake news. Credible information is often recommended as one of the strategies to fight COVID-19 fake news (Ali & Gattiti, 2020; Babalola et al., 2020; Bhatti, 2020; Okike, 2020; Yuvaraj, 2020). These actions by South African libraries show that they have responded positively to the call to source and provide “legitimate news and information and actively battle fake news” directed to all information professionals by LIASA (Crowster, 2020). This is also in line with international trends. Ali and Gattiti (2020) as well as Ladan et al. (2020) appealed to Pakistani and Nigerian academic librarians to provide access to credible information as a way to fight COVID-19 fake news. In the case of South Africa, these results indicate that South African academic librarians are already providing those resources to the users. Prior-COVID 19, the 2017 ALA statement on fake news declared access to accurate information as the best weapon against misinformation. Libraries in other jurisdiction also used LibGuides and websites to link users to credible information sources and battle fake news (Bhatti, 2020; Fallis, 2015; Okike, 2020; Yu & Mani, 2020).

An area that is often ignored when reviewing the role of libraries in fighting fake news is the collection development and research support offered by librarians in this area although Babalola et al. (2020) and De Paor and Heravi (2020) recommended that libraries should display an anti-fake news posture in their collection development. Babalola et al. (2020) is of the view that by purchasing material with credible COVID-19 material, libraries could raise awareness through collection development. This study showed proof that South African academic libraries are collecting resources that could be useful to the fight against fake news.
Libraries in South Africa also rely to Information and Media Literacy as a weapon against fake news. Information Literacy is about recognising the need for information, locating relevant quality information to solve that need, evaluating the information and applying it in an ethical manner (UNESCO, 2008). UNESCO proclaims Media and Information Literacy as a tool against COVID-19 fake news (UNESCO, 2020b). People with high levels of IL skills are able to find information that is relevant, credible and trustworthy. Librarians and many researchers have been nearly unanimous in affirming information and media literacy as the primary weapon in the fight against misinformation. In Nigeria, for example, Iginovia et al.'s (2020) study on the role of IL in curtailing fake news in academic libraries found that the Library and Information Science undergraduate students view IL as an effective tool to fight the spread of COVID-19 fake news. In the context of China, certain universities reportedly adjusted their offerings to incorporate COVID-19 fake news in the IL (Guo & Huang, 2021). According to Durodolu and Ibenne (2020) educating people improves their deductive reasoning in order for them to sift through information and differentiate between fact and fiction. Although there was no explicit evidence that academic libraries in South Africa adjusted their offerings to include COVID-19 fake news in line with their Chinese counterparts (Guo & Huang, 2021), evidence from websites and LibGuides reflected that they continued with their normal Media and Information Literacy programmes online. Therefore, they continued to transfer IL skills to many clients which in turn assisted the users to evaluate information sources. Durodolu et al. (2021) affirm information literacy as one of the potent weapons at the disposal of librarians to combat misinformation.

The results of this study showed that most LibGuides in South Africa contain links to evaluation tools such as the IFLA’s “How to Spot Fake News”, CRAAP and videos on this subject. The “how to spot fake news” IFLA infographic is very popular among librarians that incorporate information on how to fight fake news in South Africa in their LibGuides. To this effect, these results are similar to those of Lim (2020), who also highlighted checklist approaches to detecting fake news as some of the most common links to 21 university library fake news LibGuides worldwide.

This study further showed that South African academic librarians participate in conferences and webinars to share strategies and discuss ways to combat fake news. This is not peculiar to South Africa, the World Health Organisation, for example, lists this among its strategies for the management of COVID-19 related fake news (WHO, 2021). In Nigeria, Babalola et al. (2020) identified seminars and talks as some of the strategies that are employed by Nigerian librarians in the fight against COVID-19 fake news. This means that South African libraries are in line with other agencies and libraries in utilising conferences and seminars to share perspectives and best practices on how to fight fake news.

No evidence was found in this study that any of the academic libraries attempted to repackaged COVID-19 information into local languages – a call made by AfLIA. There are two possible explanations for this. 1) Indigenous languages are highly marginalised in the country. This may be a reflection of the continuation of this marginalisation. 2) Most universities in the country teach and research in English (with a few also using Afrikaans). It is possible, therefore, that academic librarians interpreted AfLIA’s call as referring to public librarians.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study sought to establish the contribution of South African academic libraries to the COVID-19 fake news vice. This study determined that librarians employed various strategies to fight the scourge including by relying on their empowerment programs (in the form of Information and Media Literacy), provision of quality and credible information to users, support for research and collection development, creating awareness and using various tools to evaluate information. Conference and other forums have also been utilised as some form of information sharing platforms. The study showed that libraries have also employed LibGuides and Websites as platforms to fight fake news in South Africa. The study reminded librarians that fake news is not a once-off battle but something that will exist for our lifetime. The results of this study point to the important role played by libraries as sources of trustworthy information during times of crisis. Therefore, these results can be used as a template of how libraries can deal with crises situations in future. Further, these results affirm the role of libraries in South Africa and other countries in the fight against fake news. This role could be best carried out with or as part of multi-disciplinary efforts and teams. This study brought the perspective of the global South to the discourse about fake news and the responses of libraries to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As pointed out in the introduction, this is a preliminary study that is limited by the fact that it did not collect any empirical data from those involved in the fight against fake news. Therefore, studies that utilise surveys and/or interviews can be useful in highlighting issues that information professionals are contending with in the fight against misinformation in their environments. Studies that assess or evaluate the effectiveness of library strategies in fighting fake news can also shed more light on this phenomenon. The linguists can study the impact that lack of COVID-19 messaging in indigenous languages abetted COVID-19 fake news.

Author statement

I would like to confirm that I am the sole author of this manuscript and that I have cited all relevant documents used in its preparation. Furthermore, I certify that this manuscript has not been and will not be submitted to or published in any other publication before the finalization of the review process by the Journal of Academic Librarianship.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the journal editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their academic contributions which helped to strengthen my manuscript.

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