

Genuine Librarians as a Shield between Fake Information and Library Patrons (Promotion of Critical Information Literacy)

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Abstract:

In this paper, the author explains the role of the librarians in the Jagodina Public Library, Serbia in promoting critical information literacy among the patrons in response to the so-called post-truth era, in which fake news proliferates on the Internet causing people to rely on their emotions and believe in such news. More than a decade ago, the challenge for the librarians was how to introduce computer literacy to their patrons and provide space with free Internet access. As time went on, the librarians realized how important it was for their patrons to develop information and media literacy skills because it was not enough to simply surf the web; they needed to learn how to use it more wisely and recognize if something could be trusted or not. The librarians had a range of professional development training and seminars, in order to raise the patrons' awareness of the importance of critical thinking. They conducted a survey on the patrons' routines in the use of the Internet and social networks. After the analysis of the survey data, the librarians held informal conversation sessions with the Internet users and introduced information and media literacy, the dangers of fake news, and deceptions on the Internet. In addition, the librarians presented their unofficial quick guide to spotting fake news. They had to be very careful because fake news on the web, as a sensitive topic, could make the users upset or disagree with the librarians. Since a librarian was always available to the users at any time during the working hours in the Internet centre of the Library, the patrons were free to ask them for help. The library patrons gained confidence in using the Internet and filtering information. With the outbreak of COVID-19 and library closures, the users started communicating with the librarians through the "Ask a Librarian" form on the Library's official website, Facebook messenger, or e-mail. The majority of them had queries about measures and restrictions in times of a pandemic, recommendations on health and books online, etc. The librarians advised them to visit government official websites or international institutions' websites regarding COVID-19 as the most reliable information sources.

Keywords: fake news, public library, critical information literacy, misinformation, COVID-19.

Introduction

Information technologies and the Internet revolutionized the world and allowed people to communicate, create and share regardless of their physical distance from one another. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) there were approximately 4.9 billion people, or 63% of the world's entire population, using the Internet in 2021 [1]. As the number of Internet users increases, the spread of news online increases too, and it is one of the biggest challenges in the 21st century. Fake news is not a new phenomenon. It existed before the rise of social media and the Internet, but its format is different now. It spreads at a high speed and its proliferation is a real issue in the Information age. According to the Collins Dictionary, "if you describe information as fake news, you mean that it is false even though it is being reported as news, for example by the media" [2]. The term "fake news" was chosen as the Collins Dictionary's official word of the year for 2017.

Media professor Melissa Zimdars of Merimack College in Massachusetts defined four categories of fake news: "Category 1: Fake, false, or regularly misleading websites that are shared on Facebook and social media. Category 2: Websites that may circulate misleading and/or potentially unreliable information. Category 3: Websites which sometimes use clickbait-y headlines and social media descriptions. Category 4: Satire/comedy sites, which can offer important critical commentary on politics and society, but have the potential to be shared as actual/literal news" [3].

Library in the Information Age

The Jagodina Public Library, as the oldest cultural institution in Jagodina, Serbia, plays the pivotal role in the local community. As a modern library in the Information age, it is the synonymous with serving the members of the local community and meeting their needs: from being a meeting, cultural and information hub to being a technology hub. Public Libraries should shift from being "houses of knowledge" to "houses of access" [4]. Therefore, the Jagodina Library has been upgrading and reinventing itself successfully due to the rapid rise of the new technologies and social media literacy. It creates up-to-date and innovative services for users of all ages. This means that the Library has an active role in enabling access to information regardless of the format.

The evolving role of librarians

The librarians in the Jagodina Public Library are more than simple information and knowledge providers because they rediscover the library continuously. They change as the technology changes or as the demands of the users change. They are aware of the fact that it is necessary to develop skills, competencies, and attitudes in order to be able to do something successfully and efficiently and stay ahead. According to the Rule book on continuous professional training in the library and information profession by the Ministry of Culture, librarians have to enhance their skills constantly in order to perform their tasks [5]. Therefore, they attend seminars accredited by the National Library of Serbia, webinars, conferences, and training programmes for the purpose of their professional development.

In addition to that, librarians are self-learners, meaning that they are always ready to read, explore and acquire. They know more about the creation, distribution and use of information than most members of the public and can teach the members of their communities how to approach information with a critical eye [6]. They are up-to-date with new developments in

information literacy, and are trained to handle fake news and master the shift from information literacy to critical information literacy and media literacy. They teach and encourage their patrons to turn information into knowledge and power.

Library and Computer Literacy

The challenges more than a decade ago were how to provide space, computers, and free access to the Internet and create effective programs in order to enhance information literacy among the patrons, as an inevitable skill in the Information age. The Library started promoting the development of information literacy in the community, not only in the main library but also in the village libraries.

The computer and Internet training sessions were organized for adults and senior citizens-Library patrons. The aim of the training sessions was to teach patrons basic computer skills by introducing computer and Internet operations, such as: typing, document writing and editing, file saving, data transfer and sharing, apps, tools, and search engines. Our goal was to make them computer literate and aware of the benefits of the Internet in their everyday life, profession, business, etc.

Survey and Results

Since there librarians in the Internet centre were at the service of their users, and interacted with them, they found out that the users did not think about truthfulness of information they encountered online. Even though some of them said that they could distinguish true from fake news, they were not able to identify genuine news in practice.

The survey was conducted in 2019. It was a paper-based short questionnaire given to 50 adult active registered Library users who are regular visitors of the Library's Internet center. Guided by the phrase "less is more", the Library team made a short survey because they did not want to occupy too much of their time and wanted it to be easy to complete and concise and to get short and prompt feedback from them. The purpose of the survey was to gain the insight into their routines regarding the Internet and social media, determine if patrons were aware of the fake news phenomenon, and if there was a need to introduce critical information and media literacy.

The majority of respondents (84%) use the Internet at the Library every working day, 8% a few times a week, 6% once a week, while just 2% use it once a month. A total of 90% of them say that Facebook is their favourite social media platform, Twitter 2%, Instagram 6% and TikTok 2%. Of the total number of respondents, 62% of the respondents say that they never read the entire text or article before sharing or commenting. On the contrary, 38% say they have never shared information without reading the whole text behind it. This means that the majority of patrons do not regularly validate the information they receive on social media before reacting. 88% of the respondents answer that they do not know how to identify fake news, and just 12% claim the opposite. Just above half of the respondents (58%) have spotted fake photos or deepfake videos online and 42% have not. Their awareness of fake news circulating online and the dangers it carried was low.

The question- Do you believe that a "happy quote" was written by Shakespeare contains the "happy quote" attributed to Shakespeare, posted on Facebook page- Heart Touching on July 31, 2018. The post contained the quote that read: "Shakespeare said: I always feel happy. You

know why? Because I don't expect anything from anyone. Expectations always hurt, Life is short. So love your life. Be Happy. And keep smiling. Just live for yourself & before you speak, listen. Before you write, think. Before you spend, earn. Before you pray. Forgive. Before you hurt, feel. Before you hate, love. Before you quit, try. Before you die, live." The majority (60%) answer that it was written by Shakespeare, while 18% claim the opposite, and 22% are not sure. This question is related to the emotional aspect of a post that encourages people to believe in what they read. The final question was related to the patrons' safety online-48% say they feel safe, while 42% say the opposite. A total of 10% are not sure if they feel safe online. This question is important because fake news is a real threat to people's safety worldwide.

According to the AAP FactCheck, Tiffany Stern, Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama at the University of Birmingham said that the quote had "nothing in common with Shakespeare". Also, Dr David McInnis, a senior lecturer in Shakespeare Studies from the University of Melbourne confirmed that "Shakespeare never wrote anything to that effect" [7].

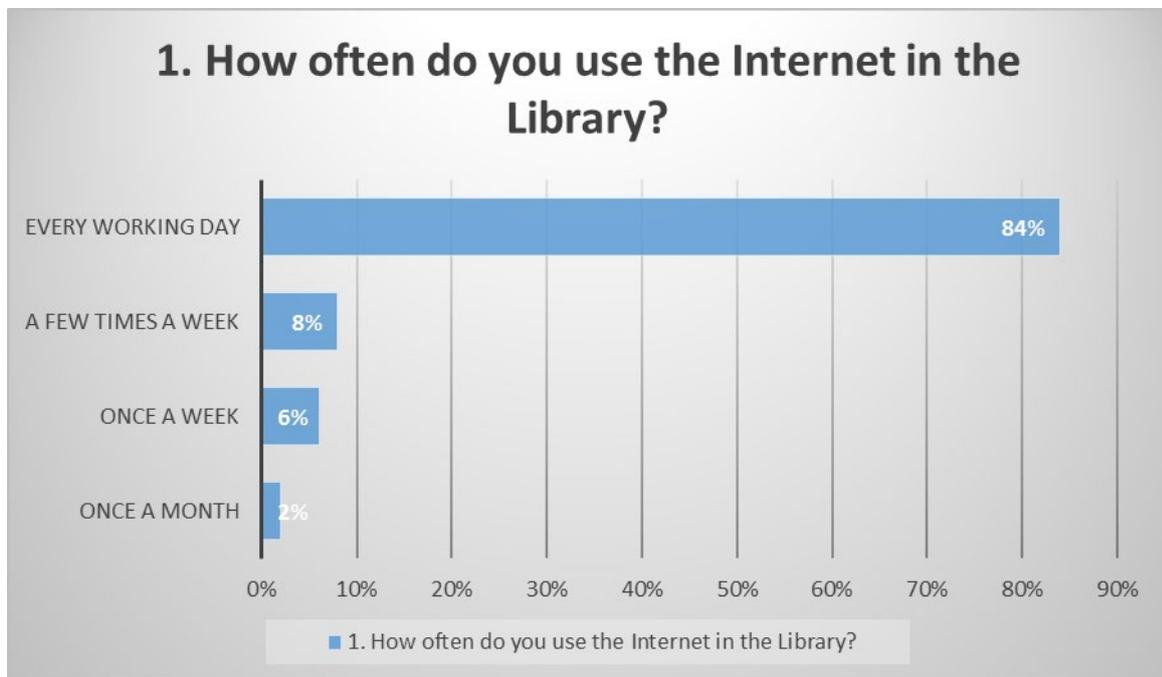


Figure 1 A survey question: How often do you use the Internet in the Library?

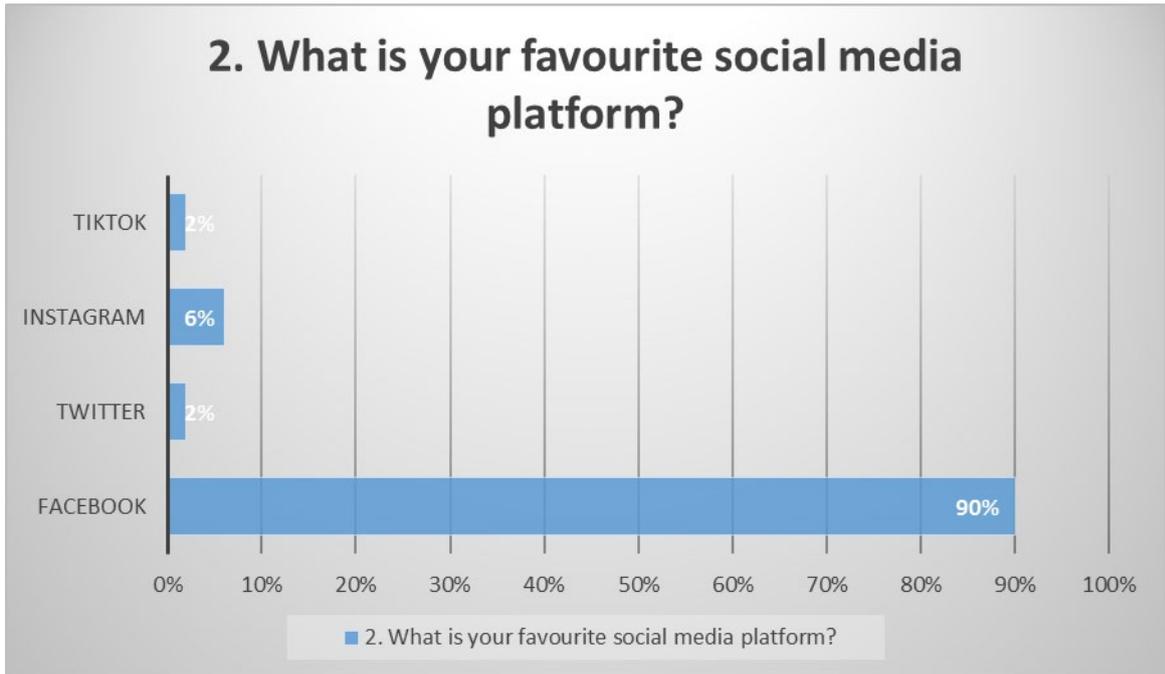


Figure 2 A survey question: What is your favourite social media platform?

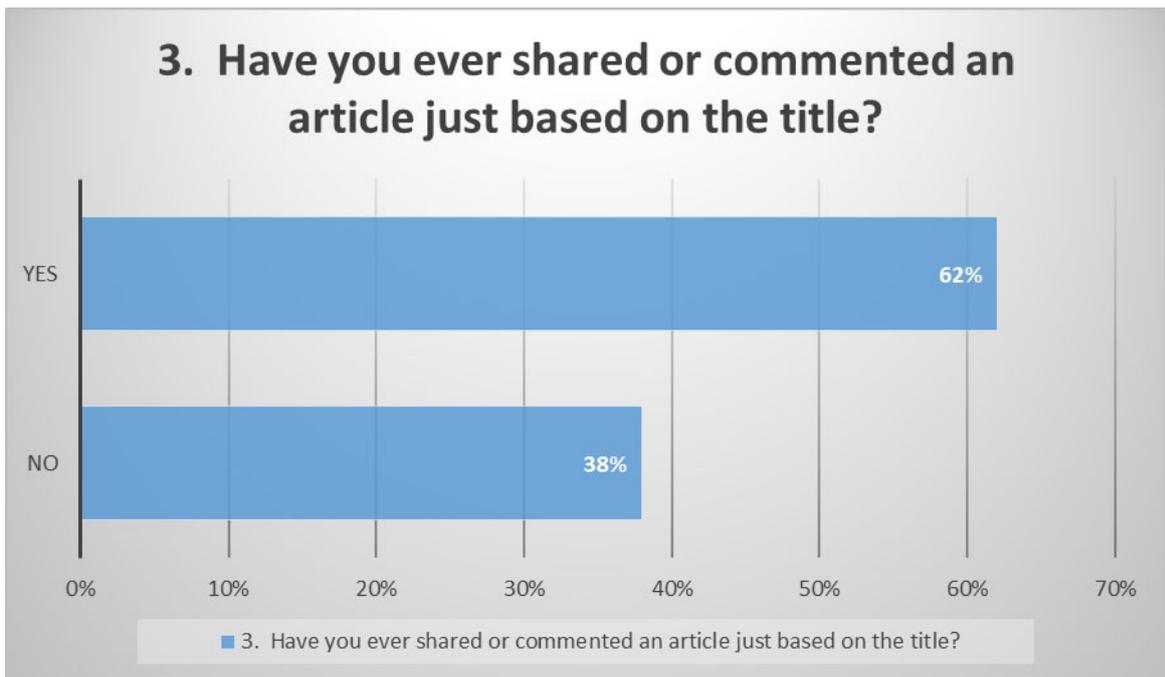


Figure 3 Have you ever shared or commented an article just based on the title?

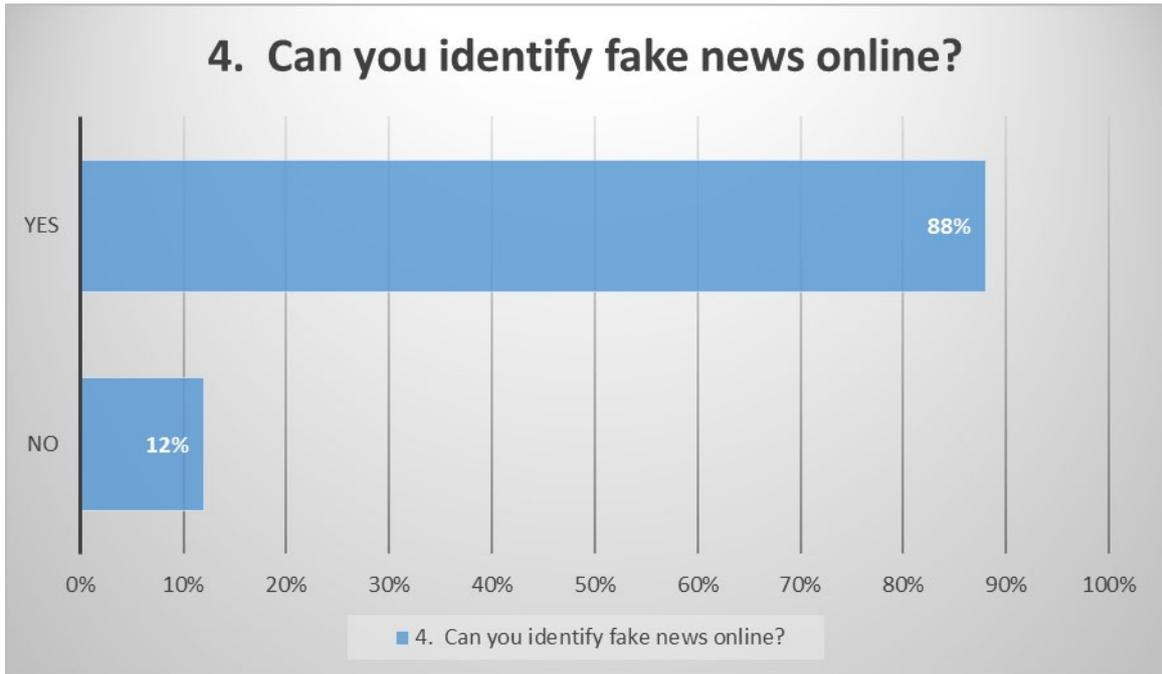


Figure 4 A survey question: Can you identify fake news online?

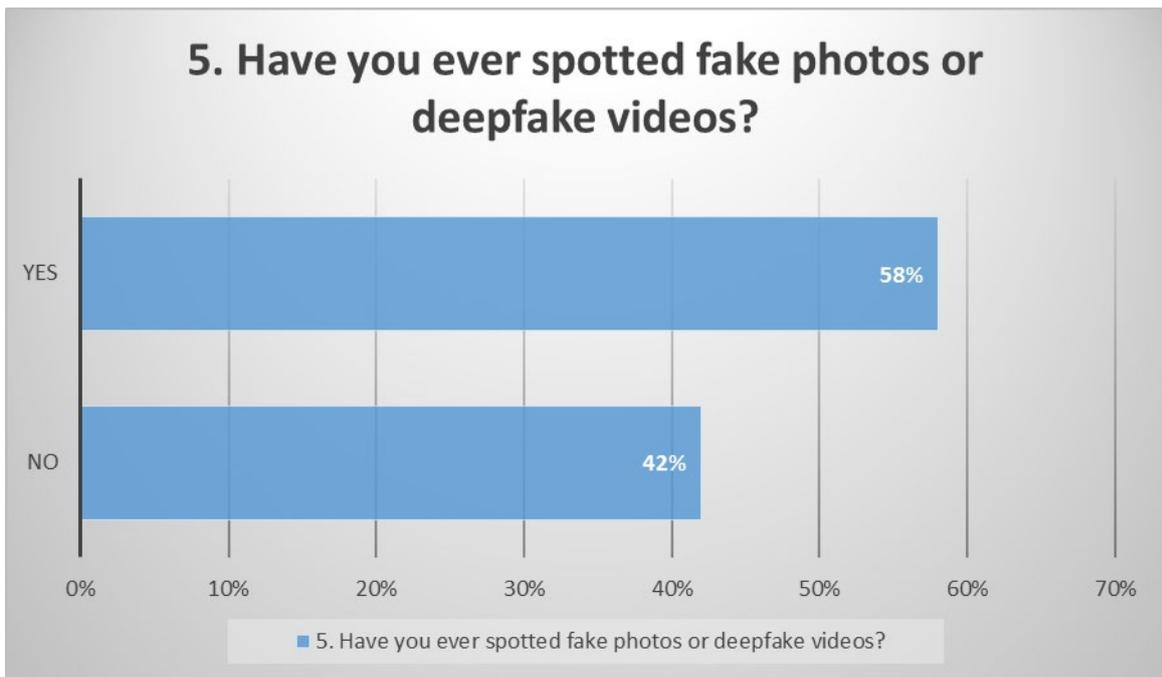


Figure 5 A survey question: Have you ever spotted fake photos or deepfake videos?

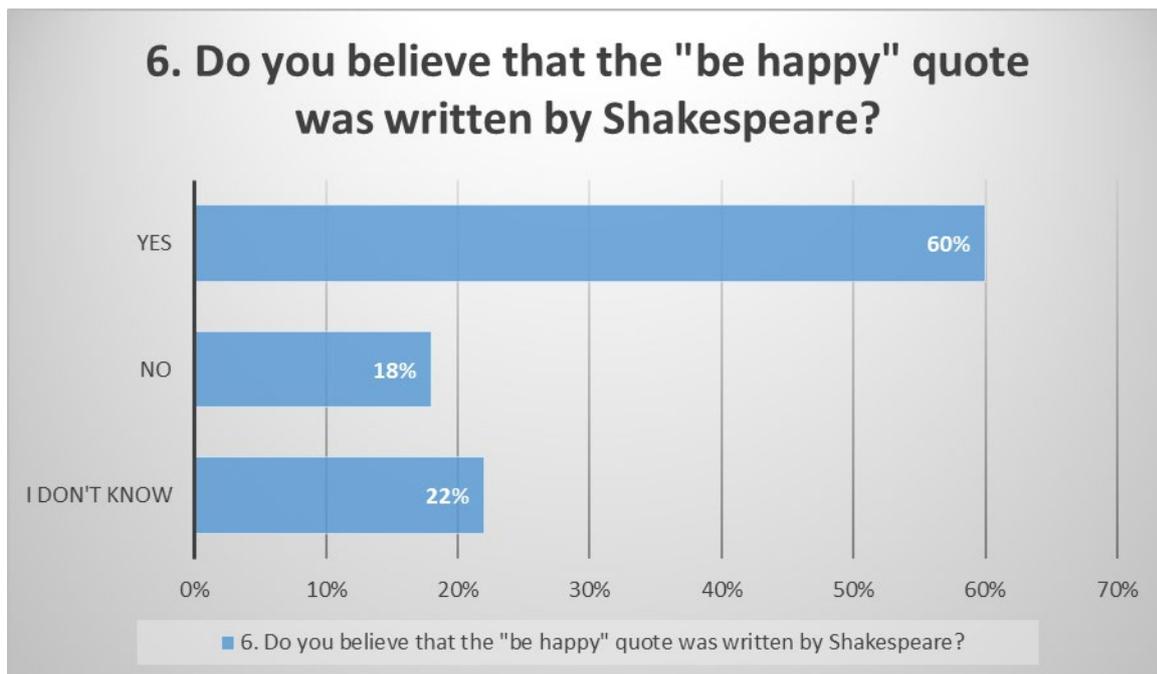


Figure 6 A survey question: Do you believe that the “be happy” quote was written by Shakespeare?

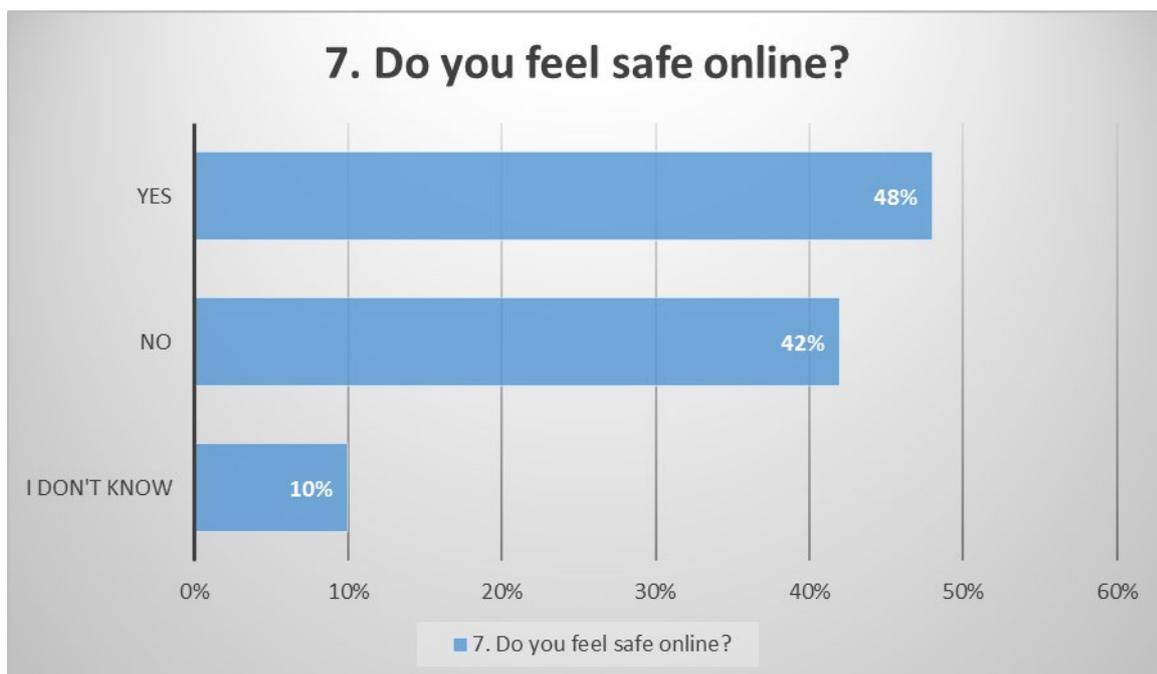


Figure 7 A survey question: Do you feel safe online?

Critical Information Literacy

“No matter the library type, the general aim of programming and instruction regarding fake news is the same: help patrons learn to identify fake news; clarify the social, political, and economic implications of fake news; and guide patrons in making informed decisions regarding their own news consumption” [8, p. 10].

Based on the analysis of the survey results, the Library team decided to educate the users and help them develop critical information literacy skills since they were the key skills for the 21st century. The omnipresence of both the Internet and social networks has contributed to the manipulation of public opinion through the fast proliferation of fake news. The aim was to raise awareness of the fake news phenomenon, enhance the patrons' critical thinking skills, make them change their approach to searching news and introduce different steps in identifying fake news.

The librarians intended to teach patrons how to critically consume information, by recognising if information was relevant, reliable, and authentic. To be able to do so, the patrons had to sharpen their critical thinking abilities, and have their own opinions, in order to identify fake news and find reliable sources of information. They had to be very careful because fake news on the web was a sensitive topic which could make the users upset or disagree with the librarians. They needed to address the emotional aspect of fake news and its influence on emotions such as anger, fear, joy, etc. so they decided to have a one-on-one approach to patrons and hold informal conversation sessions with them.

The librarians organized informal conversation and training sessions with the Internet users and introduced information literacy to them individually or in small groups of no more than three users.

The sessions included:

1. Fake news- introduction to the topic and how they can develop or improve skills to recognize fake news online.
2. Fake texts and articles- why people create and share fake stories, how to recognize them and understand the potential risks of believing in conspiracy theories.
3. Fake people- why fake people exist online, how to spot and verify them.
4. Fake photos and videos- why people create them, how to recognize them and how dangerous they can be.

Based on the IFLA's infographic "How to spot fake news" [9], the librarians made their own quick unofficial quick guide on spotting fake news, so they could distribute it to the patrons.

The guide was in Serbian and explained the following steps:

1. Check the website containing the information
2. Check the publishing date
3. Check the identity of the author
4. Check the origin of the information
5. Check additional sources of information
6. Think if it is a joke
7. Question your own attitudes towards information
8. Ask a librarian or check information on fact checking websites

They were instructed to check the website where they found the information (to see if it was genuine, how the text was written, and the "About us" section). Also, they were advised to check the information on other websites because if it was located elsewhere, the probability that it was not fake increased. It was also important to check the date and whether the news itself had been modified over time. Checking the author's name, and their other articles could reveal whether or not the information was true. If there were no sources or the sources provided did not back up the news, then it was fake news. They should explore the possibility that the news was just a joke. Also, their own beliefs and attitudes could affect their judgement. The patrons had tendencies to like something and believe in it if it was aligned with their own

beliefs. Asking a librarian for help or checking the news on some of the fact checking websites both in English and Serbian was the final step that was introduced.



Figure 8 How to spot fake news, IFLA



Figure 9 How to spot fake news on the Internet, the unofficial guide, The Library team

Additionally, they learnt how to stay safe online (setting strong passwords, being careful what they click, not sharing anything, reporting if something upsets them, not accepting random friend requests, watching out for phishing scams, reading the website privacy policy, safe browsing, etc.).

To instruct the users on how to check the authenticity of news online, pay attention to the content, and avoid fake news, the librarians used the quick guide, various texts and videos, exercises, and short quizzes. They focused on Facebook more than on other social networks since it was the most popular platform among them. The patrons were shown examples of social media deceptions, propaganda, misleading information, fake news bots, fake photos and deepfake videos, hoax e-mails, etc., and they could demonstrate in practice that they comprehended the topic.

COVID-19 and Infodemic

According to John Vincent, libraries, as trusted civic institutions which provide equal access to information and freedom of expression, have a unique role in supporting people in times of crisis [10].

Therefore, with the outbreak of COVID-19 and library closures, the librarians faced the unpredictable challenges and had to adapt to the “new normal”. The pandemic was accompanied by an infodemic. Rotkhkopf 2003 defined the infodemic as “a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities”[10]. The virus itself was not only a threat to people’s physical health, but also to their emotional health since they became more vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation than in the times before the crisis.

In the time of infodemic, disinformation and misinformation took over the Internet as they were shared widely on social media. Clair Wardle of FirstDraftNews.com pointed out seven types of misinformation and disinformation: satire or parody, misleading content, imposter content, fabricated content, false content, false context and manipulated content [11]. In general, misinformation is spreading news without bad intentions because you think something is true (misunderstand the disease, misconceptions about the vaccine), while disinformation is the deliberate spread of news even though you know it is not true (blaming racial groups, governments, or 5G network for the spread of the virus).

The librarians managed to reconsider their role in the local community and made efforts to meet the needs of the patrons in these changing circumstances. They had to shift from an in-person approach to patrons to a virtual one since libraries were closed. Through the “Ask a Librarian” form on the Library official website, Facebook messenger, and e-mail, the patrons were able to communicate with the librarians. Despite having acquired critical information skills, they needed assistance since the COVID-19 information overload through social media triggered anxiety, depression, panic, uncertainty, and insecurity among the patrons. However, the librarians were there to guide them through the fight against fake news.

The librarians promoted the government’s initiatives regarding the pandemic, discussed conspiracy theories, provided consultation services, gave advice on reliable websites regarding COVID-19 both national and international, solved doubts about suspicious contents online, recommended the books online, etc. They shared with the patrons the infographic “How to spot fake news COVID-19 Edition” by IFLA and discussed the steps included [12]. Finally, the librarians instructed them to study “COVID-19 mythbusters” on the World Health Organization’s official website [13], so they could get the facts regarding health and the virus in one place.



Figure 10 How to Spot Fake News Covid-19 Edition, IFLA

Conclusion

Librarians are genuine in their desire to promote critical information literacy among their patrons and in their communities. They serve as the patrons' shield against false and misleading information. While a public library's involvement in the battle against fake news may initially appear insignificant, it takes one step at a time, and aims to reach a broader community. With the help of librarians, patrons gain and improve their critical and logical thinking skills, which allow them to identify genuine and reliable information, rather than doubt everything they read. While it is impossible to completely eradicate fake news, it is crucial to ask questions, evaluate information and reason logically in order to reduce its impact on people's lives.

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