

## **Fighting Fake News and Disinformation: a scholar experience in Latin America**

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### **Abstract:**

*Since 2016 the Seminar on Information and Society at the Library and Information Research Institute (IIBI) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico has addressed Fake News and Disinformation as part of its projects. The Seminar comprises a group of Latin American library scholars who have worked to shape a research agenda to find solutions to the Fake News and disinformation phenomena from a library perspective. This contribution will show concrete examples of projects from this Seminar, such as the Ethical Use of Information Week: Post-truth and Fake News in 2017, which was a series of webinars, workshops, and round tables along with library associations, public and academic libraries, and library schools from Mexico, aimed to build a national conversation about Fake News and disinformation.*

**Keywords:** Disinformation, Fake News, Post truth, Collaboration, Research.

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### **Introduction**

As human societies become more complex, there is a greater need to understand the impact of information on every sphere of our activities. Over the last decades, we have seen a series of terms trying to address all the dynamics around the information.

Our society is infodiverse, which is reflected in our practices in using, producing, and searching information. During past years our lives have been shaped by the interactions between the different digital platforms, and the pandemic came to enhance this dependence. We are living under a platform society (Dijck, Thomas, & de Waal, 2018), and this *platformization* has had important consequences in different areas of society, and the dynamics in the information environment have also been amplified. One of these is disinformation.

## **Fake News and Disinformation**

The term disinformation has quickly entered the public conversation, from political and journalistic jargon to having a crucial presence in academia, industry, public debates, and the everyday life of society.

The origin of disinformation as a concept date back to the beginning of the 20th century, and its peak came with the Cold War. However, the activities and practices that we now call disinformation have been with us for a long time. Disinformation has been around us for centuries, as its attempts to regulate, spread, and control it. As a modern phenomenon, disinformation encompasses the digital technologies we have used for the past two decades. The internet changed how we search, produce, and consume information. Social media allows more content creation. Users now have more choices. But within these choices, there is also wrong, harmful, and biased information that could harm people, institutions, and society.

There is a broad consensus to refer to disinformation as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit (European Commission, 2017). Disinformation is a multifaceted phenomenon, does not have one single root cause, and thus does not have one single solution. Disinformation and the information disorders in general, can't be addressed without a broader look into our informational ecosystems.

In 2016, several events shaped public opinion and significantly impacted the information field. The term "fake news" became mainstream during the 2016 US election campaign, but other events helped spread this term worldwide, such as the Brexit referendum and the Colombian Peace Accord. From then, "fake news" and disinformation campaigns began to position themselves on international agendas, even beyond electoral narratives. At that time, it took the form of a post-truth quickly adopted by the media along with other concepts such as "alternative facts." Although, years before these events, different organizations considered disinformation a global risk with potential adverse effects in different spheres; democracy, social life, and institutions (World Economic Forum, 2013).

From that moment, we have been exposed to an amplified information crisis that is constantly evolving, and this has been due to a mixture of different factors; an increasing lack of trust in public institutions; an information overload making it more difficult for users and organizations to process and consume information; and a greater dependency of internet platforms in every human activity.

Disinformation causes confusion and has a chilling effect on freedom of expression and information. People no longer feel safe to express their ideas for fear of online harassment and of being targeted by disinformation campaigns; others feel paralyzed and silenced by the puzzlement and incertitude created by the surrounding information pollution and remove themselves from public debate concerning key issues of public interest (APC, 2021). Disinformation cannot be addressed without considering rights such as the right freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy.

Posetti & Bontcheva (2021) developed an extensive research in which they develop an overview of international responses to this phenomenon. This global study maps diverse international responses to disinformation, along with the impacts of counter-disinformation measures on the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The authors developed a typology

of 11 different responses under four umbrella categories ranging from identification and investigatory responses to policy and legislative measures, technological steps, and educational approaches. The activities from this Seminar align with two categories of this report—the first one under the identification responses, mainly by academic research. The second one is under the category of educational responses, which aim to promote citizens’ media and information literacy (MIL), critical thinking, and verification in online information consumption.



Fig. 1 The 4 Top-level response categories and their eleven sub-categories. (Posetti & Bontcheva (2021).

### Seminar on Information and Society

In November 2002 a group of scholars and librarians reunited at the 20th Library and Information Research Colloquium at the then Library Research Center (CUIB) at the National

Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) discussed the intersections between LIS, information and society from diverse library perspectives.

The Seminar began by addressing the interactions between LIS Education with society, with a particular focus on information ethics. During the next years, the main approach was the cultural diversity. Concepts such as multiculturalism in the context of information production, information availability, and information services were addressed. The Seminar has presented many of its projects in different Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, Argentina, Costa Rica, and Ecuador.

Between 2011 and 2016, the Seminar focused on studies around the concept of “infodiversity” by theoretically analyzing the variety of types, forms, and formats in which information is produced and consumed. Infodiversity is a way to understand and see a larger picture of what and how we produce, consume, and share information. Notably, this concept is a formal research area at the Library and Information Research Institute at UNAM. After a wide-ranging debate, reflecting the diverse interests and library professional experience of participants, four books were published around infodiversity and related topics (Table 1).

Disinformation, "Fake News", and other information disorders haven been part of the Seminar work since late 2016 when fake news and alternative facts were in the spotlight. Since then, the Seminar has worked to shape a research agenda for disinformation that might help find solutions from a library perspective by involving practice, teaching, and research.

In 2017 the Seminar launched the "Ethical Use of Information Week: Post-truth and Fake News," which was a series of webinars, workshops, and round tables aimed to build a library national conversation about fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, along with Library Associations, Library Schools, and Academic and Public Libraries, the focus of this event was centered on these topics:

- Information literacy.
- Ethical use of Information.
- Threats to freedom of expression.
- Training courses for librarians.

In 2018, in collaboration with library associations, the Seminar organized a series of workshops for librarians, mainly using the IFLA Infographic on How to Spot Fake News and promoting critical thinking as an essential skill in information literacy. That year, the book "The post-truth and fake news: the ethical use of information" was published.

These collaborations with many library sectors have been fruitful and raised several projects and publications on disinformation from a library perspective involving topics such as Access to Information, Ethical Use of Information, Citizen Participation, and Democracy. In 2019 a book on "Information, citizen participation, and democracy" was released.

In April 2020, members of the Seminar collaborated on a series of webinars on Information and pandemics. They addressed several complex topics as the problem at that time was too complicated. Health Information Overload, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in academic libraries to combat disinformation, disinformation in photo records, Fact-checkers and libraries, among others, were addressed. As a result, in 2021, a book on "Information, misinformation, libraries, and users in the 21st century" was published.

SEMANA DEL USO ÉTICO DE LA INFORMACIÓN:

# La posverdad y las noticias falsas

6 al 10 de  
noviembre  
de 2017



• **LUNES 6**

*Ciudad de México:*  
- UNAM / IIBI

• **MARTES 7**

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- UASLP / Facultad de  
Ciencias de la Información

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- UABCS / Departamento  
de Biblioteca

*Monterrey:*  
- UANL / Colegio de  
Bibliotecología y Ciencias  
de la Información

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- UNAM / Dirección  
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- UNACH / Lic. en  
Bibliotecología y Gestión  
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- UNAM / Colegio de  
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• **VIERNES 10**

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- UNAM / IIBI

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Fig. 2 The Ethical Use of Information Week Poster (Spanish).

<b>Year</b>	<b>Book title</b>
2003	LIS Education and Society.
2005	Ethics and Information.
2007	Multiculturalism and information services.
2008	Cultural diversity and access to information.
2010	Rescue and dissemination of cultural diversity in a global context.
2011	Right to information, public and private good: community and individual access.
2012	Knowledge and information as factors of Latin America integration.
2013	Regulations that impact infodiversity and open access to information in a global and multicultural society.
2015	Agents on Infodiversity and open-access networks.
2017	Infodiversity and the ethical use of individual and collective knowledge.
2017	The ethical use of information and open and free access practices.
2018	The post-truth and fake news: the ethical use of information.
2019	Information, citizen participation, and democracy.
2021	Information, disinformation, libraries, and users in the 21st century.
2022	Infodiversity and access to historical and documentary memory.

Table 1. Research book list from the Seminar Information and Society.

### Final remarks

Over the last five years of researching disinformation from a library perspective, we can point out:

- There is an apparent disconnection between academic research, libraries, and civil society over this phenomenon.
- Building a public disinformation research agenda is necessary from a library, archives, and museum perspective.
- More focus should be directed towards understanding different internet sub-cultures and the different interests and patterns of behavior associated with these groups.
- Community participation within the library becomes an integral part of the development of any program on fighting disinformation.
- There is an urgent need for greater institutional cooperation that allows libraries to benefit from each other's expertise fully.
- Disinformation is a problem that won't disappear any time soon. Every time it gets more extensive and more complex.

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