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# Pizzagate and a slice of free speech

## Media literacy outside of the classroom

Since 2016, the public eye has turned to the problems of mis- and disinformation. As a result, many librarians sprang into action to spread the good news about information and media literacies. At the University of Kansas (KU), we initially joined the rush and created a media literacy LibGuide.<sup>1</sup>

As recent scholarship has shown, dosing undergraduates with media literacy instruction is an effective response that can help students trump even their own political biases when evaluating information online.<sup>2</sup>

Problematically, in our experience, not all course faculty invite librarians into their classes for media literacy instruction, and LibGuides are most effective when coupled with a class. To be more proactive, we developed a series of events and tools to provide students with lessons in media and information literacy outside of the classroom. Here we share how we fact checked a U.S. presidential debate with students, gave course faculty a platform to challenge the way we think about the media, and provided

students multiple outlets to voice their opinions on such topics as detecting misinformation, writing Fake News Mad Libs, and valuing the First Amendment. We will overview the success of our media literacy campaign, and delineate our own failings so that you can launch your own plan.



On Constitution Day, some students glibly commented on their favorite amendment while others seriously reflected on the long-term effects of some amendments.

### U.S. presidential debate fact-checking party

In partnership with the campus committee Make Your Mark, several KU librarians collaborated to host a live fact-checking party

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for the final U.S. presidential debate.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the fact-checking party was to foster student engagement and authority in civic life. Undergraduates were active partners and participants in the event.

Our process for preparing for and holding the event involved many people inside and outside of the libraries. First, our organizing team of librarians recruited students as fact checkers and audience members. Three journalism students answered our call to be official fact checkers alongside three librarians. Dividing up responsibility for debate topics, librarians and the students collaborated on a LibGuide to be used during the event,<sup>4</sup> and practiced our fact-checking skills and our workflow against a recording of the first 2016 U.S. presidential debate.

The night of the event, approximately 40 students joined us in one of the libraries' large spaces. There, on one screen we displayed a Google Doc with the fact-checkers' immediate research findings. Another screen tracked our official fact-checked statements and audience questions posted to Twitter with the hashtag #kudebatewatch. The debate was broadcast on a large central screen. Students also flashed flags, which we provided, when they thought a statement was true, false, or a red herring. In addition, by impromptu student demand, we used a whiteboard to tally buzzwords, such as "emails" or "Russia."

Preparing for the event was a time-cost, but afforded us a great opportunity to partner with students. Between swapping research tips and strategies, we found ourselves opening numerous tabs in our browsers to conduct research. In this sense, we were collaboratively building skills to research "laterally," a technique used by professional fact checkers to efficiently and effectively identify reliable sources to assess information.<sup>5</sup>

Though we only trained three students to fact check, students in the audience actively researched and Tweeted comments on their own devices while waving their flags. By providing physical and virtual platforms for student thought and expression, we effectively fostered an atmosphere in which students could question and assert their own authority as civic agents. Participating students were further validated as

researchers and fact checkers when the campus newspaper reported on their successes on the front page the next day.<sup>6</sup>

## Teach-ins

A teach-in is "an extended meeting usually held on a college campus for lectures, debates, and discussions to raise awareness of or express a position on a social or political issue."<sup>7</sup> At KU, this entails faculty giving ten-minute lightning talks in related areas of research before a general discussion. We chose to organize a series of teach-ins as part of our media literacy initiative for two reasons: disinformation campaigns have targeted social justice and activist movements, and KU Libraries had successfully addressed the socio-political context of media literacy through a December 2016 teach-in. This earlier event, the "Standing Rock" teach-in, brought nearly 300 people to KU Libraries, including faculty and students from KU and Haskell Indian Nations University, as well as members of the greater Lawrence community.<sup>8</sup>

We held two teach-ins related to our media literacy campaign. The first, "Read Between the Lines: The Media and You," occurred in April 2017. The four speakers were professors in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications and the Department of Film and Media Studies. Unfortunately, this teach-in was not well attended, drawing about 20 people, likely due to the fact that finals were around the corner and our minimal publicity effort. Additionally, the advertized topic was too broad, it was not a clickbait topic. We may have drawn a larger crowd if we had marketed the speakers' topics, such as fact-checking techniques, the use of film as a critical lens of American history and race, or how social media can mobilize social movements.

The second media literacy teach-in, "Social Justice, the Media, and You," occurred in fall 2017. The teach-in featured lightning talks by professors in Communication Studies, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, and International and Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. The topics related to social justice topics on campus and included the Emmett Till Memory Project;

using media to prompt the U.S. National Park Service to include historically significant LGBTQ sites in its register; media representation of ethnic and racial minorities; and a feminist critique of social media trolling.

This teach-in was well attended by about 50 people, which was likely related to a few factors. First, it occurred when students were not consumed with finals. Also, we publicized the event earlier and more frequently through the libraries' social media account and campus partners. It did not hurt that one of the speakers offered her students extra credit for attendance.

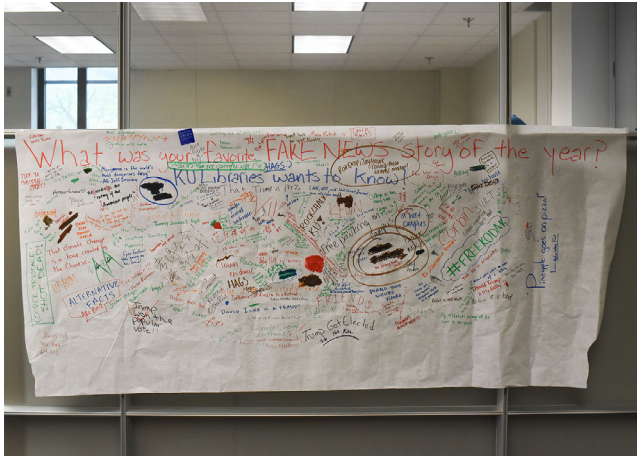
### Finals and welcome week

The second way we sought to engage student in their opinions about disinformation and misinformation was held during spring 2017 finals weeks and fall 2017 welcome week. We posed the following questions on butcher block paper: "What was your favorite fake news story of the year?" and "How can you tell a news story is fake?" We encouraged students to write down answers to these questions by placing the paper on tables near the high-traffic entrances of the main and undergraduate libraries, creating free-speech zones. The response was tremendous and varied. Students not only answered the question, but they also annotated, censored, and replied back to the responses of their peers. The students were having brief, but authentic debates, while maintaining anonymity.

In addition during spring 2017 finals week, we wanted to offer students a fun way to unpack the creation of "fake news" and to give them a brain break. We did this by providing

students Fake News "Mad Libs" and coloring sheets on which students could create their own satirical news stories. These handouts were left on tables near the entrances of our main and undergraduate libraries during finals week in the free speech zones. We did not track usage of these handouts or ask for feedback on them. We merely offered students an opportunity to think about how "fake news" and "alternative facts" might be created.

The handouts did move quickly the first couple of days, however, usage declined further into the week. Thus, if we decide to do this again in the future we would like to offer more "Mad Libs" and coloring sheet options to keep students engaged throughout the week.



As part of the welcome week at the University of Kansas, students shared their favorite fake news story of the year.

### U.S. Constitution and Citizenship Day

After engaging with students through more event-based programming, we wanted to give them a way to express their opinions about the disinformation and misinformation that surrounded them. The first of such activities, U.S. Constitution and Citizenship Day (Constitution Day), provided an opportunity to engage students in conversations about the First Amendment, freedom of the press, and other constitutional rights related to the media. The campaign included analog and digital methods in our main and undergraduate libraries.

Our analog methods included the distribution of free pocket editions of the U.S. Constitution, which were in English and Spanish and contained constitutional trivia, available at designated free speech zones. We posed questions such as "What is your favorite U.S.

Constitutional amendment? Why?” and “What would you change about the U.S. Constitution?” We call the results of these zones “graffiti paper.”

To further encourage asynchronous dialogue among students, we posted a large U.S. Constitution display on the wall in our undergraduate library. There, we fixed a copy of the Bill of Rights next to selected Amendments, such as the First and Fourteenth Amendments, above a long roll of butcher block paper where students posted their comments. We then assembled and placed table tents with U.S. Constitution questions on group study tables. We selected questions from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ “Civics Flash Cards for the Naturalization Test.”<sup>9</sup> In the digital format, these same flash cards were displayed on the informational monitors on the main floor of the libraries. We also promoted the activities on social media using the hashtag #KUConstitutionDay.

Our Constitution Day activities brought high student engagement with minimal efforts on our part. The few hundred copies of the Constitution were gone in about three days. Students and others communicated opinions through the graffiti paper, filling over four five-foot-long butcher block paper sheets. Ironically this activity, which promoted free speech, also prompted some censorship with participants scribbling out comments. Additionally, other campus partners helped spread the campaign’s message.

For instance, a professor in journalism posed the questions to students and videoed their responses. He has plans to make these tapings available to the public as a snapshot of students’ opinions of press freedoms. The Office of First Year Experience re-Tweeted the constitutional wall display.

## Conclusion

Engaging students in media literacy discussions outside of the classroom yielded some great benefits. The student feedback we received through teach-in discussions and graffitied butcher block paper indicates that students are engaged with the news and willing to debate their points of view. In the future, we hope to continue these conversations to better understand how students navigate and are impacted by the media.

## Notes

1. “Media Literacy,” University of Kansas Libraries, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://guides.lib.ku.edu/medialiteracy>. We thank Tami Albin, Brian Moss, and Amalia Monroe-Gulick for joining our efforts in creating this guide.

2. Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation | Civic Engagement Research Group,” *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (February 2017): 27–28.

3. The authors would like to acknowledge our partners in this event: Brian Moss, Amalia Monroe-Gulick, LeAnn Meyer, Meggie Mapes, Nikki Pirch, Sydney Wickliffe, Jennifer Muse, Mona Ahmed, Chloe Carlson, and Reid Stein. We especially acknowledge and thank Sofia Leung for initiating and organizing the event.

4. “2016 Presidential Debate Fact-Checking Guide,” University of Kansas Libraries, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://guides.lib.ku.edu/2016debates>.

5. Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew, “Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information,” Social Science Research Network, October 6, 2017, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3048994>.

6. Lara Korte. “During Final Debate, Students Check the Facts,” University Daily Kansan (Lawrence, Kansas), October 19, 2016.

7. “Teach-In,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teach-in>.

8. The authors would like to acknowledge Stephanie Gamble for initiating and co-organizing the Standing Rock teach-in with Callie Wiygul Branstiter.

9. “Civics Flash Cards for the Naturalization Test,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/see-all-section-items-title-right/Civics%20Flash%20Cards%20for%20the%20Naturalization%20Test/55236?destination=node/41139>. 