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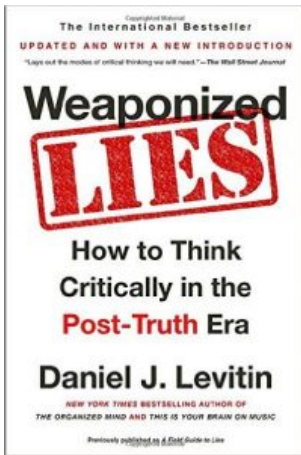
BOOK RECS



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Book Review—Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era

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In 2016, the Stanford History Education Group published its study outlining the development, testing, and validation of a series of tests which assess young people's civic online reasoning. What they found shocked them: middle-schoolers unable to distinguish sponsored content from news items, high-schoolers who blindly accepted the veracity of images posted on photo-sharing sites, and college students unaware that activist organizations would present biased information. The group did not mince words when it referred to its findings as a "threat to democracy" (p. 7).

I first read about this study in the introduction to Daniel Levitin's book, *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth*

Era, the subject of this book review. However, in the month since, I've encountered references to it in an NPR broadcast, a *New York Times* article, and most recently, in the Digital Citizenship presentation our librarian gave to our middle school's staff today.

The alarm is sounding all around us.

The need is clear.

Our youth lack the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the "world of information and misinformation cohabitating side by side" on the Internet (Levitin, 2016, p. 253). In her 2010 analysis of the concept of information, Marcia Bates explains that the nature of information has long been hotly contested and is seen by some scholars as "requiring truth" and others as "indifferent to truth" (p. 2359). Our current reality is that much of what we are exposed to each day is posted or reported by people who are indifferent to the truth. As such, Levitin believes it's not just the youth's critical thinking skills we should be worried about, but our own as well. His book sets out to explain why we are so bad at detecting misinformation, the forces at work against truth, and to give us a set of strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Levitin argues that human beings are storytellers by nature. This is a pitfall when it comes to evaluating claims and a characteristic often exploited by the news media. The media is keenly aware that its audience is drawn to sensationalism. Levitin quotes U.K. journalist Damian Thompson as saying, "For a hard-pressed news editor, anguished testimony trumps dry and possibly inconclusive statistics every time" (p. 173). This is further complicated by the nature of a reporter's job, which Levitin explains, can take two vastly different forms: that of the investigative

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reporter who seeks to present all sides of an issue, and the “breaking news” reporter who seeks out eye-witness accounts to report on a story. The problem, he says, is that often the reporter and the audience will confuse these modes and perceive “data” in the handful of stories that were reported—which, he stresses, they are not (p. 172).

We need to be aware of this tendency. As library and information science (LIS) professionals, we can focus our information literacy efforts on helping information consumers understand the difference between empirical data and anecdotal information and foster their abilities to ascertain what kinds of evidence (if any) an author is using to support a claim.

Another key point that Levitin makes, and which is critical to LIS, is that “time spent evaluating claims . . . should be considered part of an implicit bargain we’ve all made” (p. 253). He points out that we are saving countless hours in our search for information, and as a result, we must commit to verifying that information to prevent the spread of misinformation. We’ve gotten quite used to the ease of a Google search, and despite all of the time we are saving, most of us feel inundated by information and claim that we don’t have time for verification. As Patricia Katopol further demonstrated, this path of least resistance can not only affect our everyday life information seeking, but has become part of our institutions. When she studied “imposed queries” at a Canadian governmental agency, she found that the agency placed more emphasis on the speed of its employees’ results than on the quality of the information they retrieved (2012).

It is profoundly difficult to change the culture of an entire organization, and furthermore, we don’t need all people to seek information in the highly-structured manner of LIS professionals. (Schmidt, 2017). I believe this is where Levitin’s advice can be of great assistance. The simple act of not accepting information at face value and having a short list of questions which allow one to scrutinize its veracity will go a long way in stemming the tide of misinformation in our world. A few valuable questions he suggests we ask include:

- Is it plausible?
- Are these claims true?
- Can we really know that?
- How do they know that?
- What biases may have crept into the collection of the numbers?
- How is the term being defined?
- Who or what established the authority of this author/expert?
- Who is behind the information?
- Is the information current?
- Could there be an alternative explanation?

Yes, it will take more time than we are used to, but we must override “our nature to want the greatest outcome for the least amount of work” (Zipf, 1949). This is the demand of an informed democracy, and the pact, he says, we must make with one another.

Finally, I would be remiss in not mentioning the heavy emphasis Levitin places on statistical and graphical literacy in the book. His examples of both purposeful and unintended manipulation are entertaining, approachable, and, sometimes, downright scary. (See below for a few cases in point.) Without a doubt, they are worth the time they take to explore.

The work of achieving high levels of numerical and informational literacy begins in the K-12 education system. Educators should view the misinformation crisis as an imperative to weave these skills through the mathematics curriculum, language arts, history, and science as well. Information professionals at the K-12 level are positioned to be leaders in developing rigorous

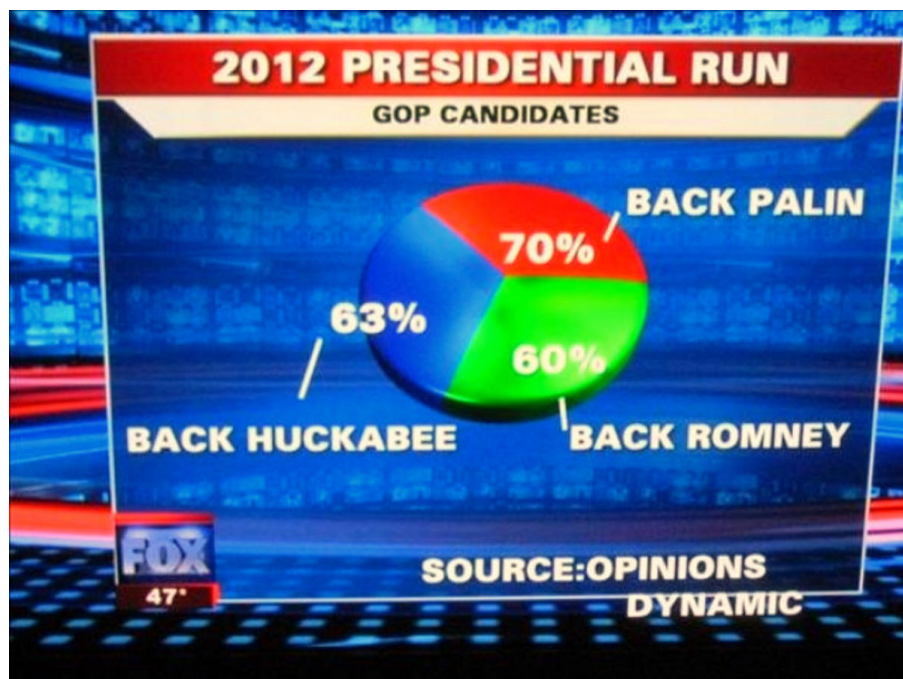
curricula in the area of information literacy. The Stanford study provides the rationale. Levitin's book provides the loose framework. LIS professionals provide the skill.

This education can, and should, continue in undergraduate studies and in the halls of our public libraries. It continues for us in Levitin's book. The flood of information—truthful and indifferent— isn't going away. Taking the time to really know that we know something is in the best interests of our communities and society.

ABOVE AVERAGE STATISTICAL MANIPULATIONS

Just in case you thought the average or mean was a safe measure of central tendency, I present: "On average, humans have one testicle" (p17).

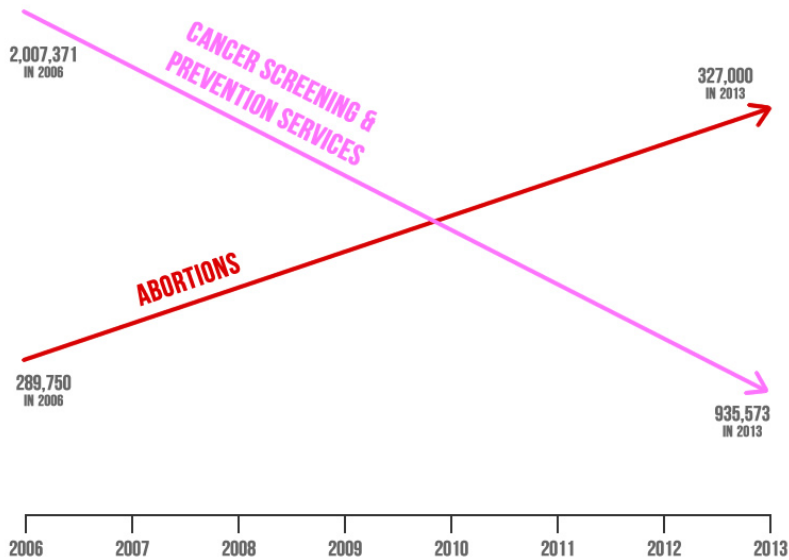
The Next Generation in Pie Charts



https://media.nbcchicago.com/images/1200*900/Fox%27s+Pie+Chart.jpg

Y-axis Anyone?

PLANNED PARENTHOOD FEDERATION OF AMERICA: ABORTIONS UP – LIFE-SAVING PROCEDURES DOWN



SOURCE: AMERICANS UNITED FOR LIFE

<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/oct/01/jason-chaffetz/chart-shown-planned-parenthood-hearing-misleading-/>

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Stanford History Education Group. (2016). *Evaluating information: The cornerstone of civic online reasoning* [Executive summary]. Retrieved from <https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>

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