Book Review: A Field Guide to Lies
February 23, 2019 · by Terri Shamroukh

Caveat emptor is Latin for “buyer beware.” A fitting maxim to begin this book review for *A Field Guide to Lies: Critical Thinking in the Information Age* (2016), by Daniel J. Levitin. The maxim refers not to the book itself, but the content within, which guides the reader through various methodologies aimed at critically assessing information in order to avoid what the author calls “lying weasels.”

I found Dr. Levitin’s guide to be both readable and informative. This book is a primer for any researcher who, like me, at times feels overwhelmed by information overload, and who simply seeks the truth. The term, information, is hard to pin down. I have been reading many definitions. In this process, I found Michael Buckland’s “pragmatic approach,” helpful. Narrowing the term to three groups, Buckland provides information as knowledge. This is how I choose to pursue my interest in genealogy — as “reducing uncertainty” (1991). As a student, consumer, amateur genealogist and one who soon hopes to be able to guide others in their research, I have struggled with some searches that have ended up to be mere hearsay or rumor and not verifiable as true.

Levitin refers to the “lying weasels” several times throughout the guide as he provides clear advice for critical thinking. He tells us at first to determine the plausibility of information by taking “a step back,” and thinking for ourselves (8). Next is a lesson on tables, charts and graphs and how they can be manipulated to suit the aims of their creator to potentially trick the consumer. Levitin explains the meaning of averages,
warning to watch out for a shift of the baseline (or denominator) figures (24).

Also, there are detailed explanations of Bayesian probability – expectation based on quantification of personal belief, then inductive and deductive reasoning or logic. There is a great wealth of information and advice to follow as Levitin systematically, and often humorously, explains how to avoid false information, whether intended, or through inaccurate reporting. He explains that “peer reviewed articles are generally more accurate than books,” and that we should always look for corroborating evidence to verify our findings (35-37). He tells us that, “Some statistics simply cannot be interpreted as presented” (63). He discusses pitfalls in survey results: both through reporting bias and the fact that some people who are surveyed lie (88).

One of my favorite parts of the guide, besides inductive and deductive reasoning, is when Levitin provides an epigram:

“It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.

Apparently, the quote was attributed variously to either Mark Twain or another humorist, Josh Billings. Levitin was able to find several uses of the quote, but had difficulty learning the true source. He turned to a research librarian at Vassar, one Gretchen Lieb. Ms. Lieb stated:

“Quotations are tricky things...Older quotations are almost like translations from another language.” She went on to provide many potential references to verify older quotes: Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Respectfully Quoted and Hathi Trust, according to Ms. Lieb, “The corpus of books from research libraries that is behind Google Books.” In the end, the quote was attributed to Josh Billings (126,127). I appreciated the nod to the librarian and also enjoyed the vicarious thrill of the chase in finding the accurate source for the quote.

Pressing on to the guide’s conclusion, Levitin states, “Meta analyses are useful because dozens or hundreds of studies from different labs are analysed to determine the weight of evidence supporting a particular claim” (142). We should avoid “cherry picking” for supporting evidence. It is important to look for disproving evidence as well (161).

Levitin then guides the reader to the best types of internet addresses such as those ending in .edu, .gov and .org, with the caveat that even these are not always without bias (138). I further learned about Google Scholar, Politifact – I had heard of it but not ever used it. Also, that one can type, “link” prior to a url and Google will return all other sites linked to it, thus one can know the affiliates and contributors of a given website. In my opinion, this could be useful. Additionally, Levitin warns us about “counter knowledge – misinformation packaged to look like fact that some critical mass of people have begun to believe” (168).

A Field Guide to Lies was enjoyable to read and chock full of information about information and how to be sure the information is true. I would have liked to have written more about Levitin’s discussions of Stephen Hawking, Higgs boson and the case studies of the United States moon landing and famous magicians. It really was an interesting read. I found this book to be a useful primer as I embark on becoming an authority on the information community: amateur genealogists. So far, I have observed
that members of this community are diverse due to being from all corners of the world. I include myself here, and I have experienced challenges in accessing true and verifiable information. As noted by Reijo Savolainen in his article, Every Day Life Information Seeking (ELIS), “The internet has increasingly affected ELIS practices by providing easily accessible sources. Even though the popularity of the networked sources has grown rapidly, it seems they will complement, rather than replace more traditional sources and channels” (2010). This rings true to me. I have witnessed in my life the transition from books and printed matter to a vastly richer supply through the internet.

Towards the end of the book, Levitin provides four case studies reiterating that there is always uncertainty and that science really just deals in probabilities. The internet is not regulated or monitored for truth and accuracy so, “The responsibility to verify claims falls on us... the scientific method is the ground from which the best critical thinking arises” (252).

References:


7 thoughts on “Book Review: A Field Guide to Lies”

*Nicole says:*
February 23, 2019 at 11:32 pm

This book sounds fascinating! I really appreciate your assessment of amateur genealogists as being so diverse, and how networked sources could be both incredibly beneficial to them, as well as incredibly biased. I think it will be interesting, as we continue through this course and into our studies as a whole in library sciences, to continue to look at how knowledge is expanded and changed by the internet.

*Reply*

*Terri Shamroukh says:*
February 25, 2019 at 10:41 am

Thank you Nicole. I agree that it will be so helpful to understand and be