

Some Thoughts Evoked by Peter Lor, Bradley Wiles, and Johannes Britz, "Re-Thinking Information Ethics: Truth, Conspiracy Theories, and Librarians in the COVID-19 Era," in *LIBRI*, March 2021

This research paper is very engaging and thought-provoking. Two of its significant contributions include: (1) a robust treatment of conspiracy theories in a COVID-19 environment; and (2) the explicitation of alethic rights of patrons (their rights to truth), which mark a major advance of the moral implications of the moral autonomy of patrons in libraries or information-seeking environments. The paper devotes its first several pages to a treatment of conspiracy theories in the COVID-19 environment. It is relatively comprehensive. However, given a penchant for pragmatism, it sets an expectation that there might be some specific advice or recommendations about how a library or information organization might deal with this disinformation or misinformation. It is a disappointment that it does not deliver such anticipated advice, only that librarians have to think more about the issue of truth in libraries. While coronavirus misinformation is a public health crisis, one could talk about other misinformation issues – in political discourse or other issues in public health discourse. The extent to which the paper discusses the COVID issue seems disproportionate to the subsequent section where it serves as a background rather than being fully addressed.

While the treatment of the COVID-19 issues is strong, it fails to fully characterize the environment in which COVID-19 disinformation or misinformation occurs, where it is created, disseminated, propagated and authorized. The difference between disinformation and misinformation is that the former includes an intent to deceive. Since intention is not always clear, one cannot always sort out a piece of disinformation from unmotivated misinformation. It is not just that certain individuals such as patrons come to believe this misinformation-disinformation, but that they belong to an ecology, in which the parts reinforce one another, where like-minded friends, peers, associates, political parties and allegiances, media authorities, political leaders, religious authorities, etc. all echo and confirm and validate the misinformation. It is an environment that creates and sustains and reinforces their beliefs, but also commands the authority to reject other contrary streams of information. This community of believers embraces not only confirmation bias (where only evidence that supports their position is accepted and contrary evidence is avoided, ignored, and rejected) but also embraces a disconfirmation bias, "in which we expend disproportionate energy trying to debunk or refute views and arguments that we find uncongenial" (Mooney 2011, n.p.). They live a "closed propaganda feedback loop" (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 33) where scientific knowledge is reduced to an alternative opinion in a culture war where one's political allegiance is more important than truth. For example, in a February 20–24, 2021 CBS poll, despite the greater access to vaccination to prevent infection and lower deaths from the coronavirus in the United States, 40% of Republicans and 38% of Independents said that they would not get vaccinated (Salvanto et al. 2021). In these cases, we have motivated misinformation, not a mere acceptance of misinformation, but

an active embrace of it, at least in the United States, probably one of the more politically polarized environments in the world.

Given that the journal, *LIBRI*, is an international journal whose purview is much larger than the United States, it is not entirely fair to use issues from the United States or the American Library Association. Unfortunately, the United States seems to have become a strong exemplar of trends in spreading and validating misinformation, inflamed by the previous presidential administration.

The second part of the paper advances D'Agostini's notion of the right of patrons to truth. It provides a novel and important set of constructs. When considering the moral autonomy of patrons in libraries (based on the moral dignity of human beings as articulated by, e.g., Kant's categorical imperative), there are implications for professional service: patrons should be able to pursue freedom and self-determination in their selection of materials and sources, they should enjoy protection from injury (materials for adults should not be readily accessible to children), equality of opportunity (all patrons should receive the same level of service), privacy (information about a patron's borrowing habits should be secure and regularly expunged), and minimal well-being (patrons should have the right to access to information to deal with the necessities of life) (Froehlich 1992). What is tacitly implied, but omitted from that list, is what is provided to the patron is truth when pursuing their information needs (in contrast to recommendations for their entertainment or cultural needs). The invocation of D'Agostini that makes explicit this right of truth for patrons is a valuable contribution to the field's ethical literature.

Truth has always been a concern in libraries, disagreeing to some extent with Ridi when Ridi claims that truth is not a relevant concept for librarians, despite the fact that "that there are many different levels of truth and large parts of library holdings that cannot be classified as true or false" (Lor, Wiles and Britz 2021, n.p.). Truth is a factor in collection decisions and the use of or supply of resources in response to a reference question. But focusing on the issue at hand, there is a question whether D'Agostini's work much advances the daily activities of librarians beyond what is already in the literature or on their daily agenda. In a prescient work, John Swan and Noel Peattie, in *The Freedom to Lie: A Debate about Democracy* (1989), undertook what might be labeled a conservative (Peattie) versus liberal (Swan) position about including materials in library collections such as those of David McCalden, who published materials on Holocaust denial (similar to literature advocating that COVID-19 is a hoax). Does D'Agostini's patron's right to truth mandate inclusion of McCalden's materials in the collection (to make people learn about those who make fake revisionist history) or rejection of the book (because it includes "outright lies, false statements knowingly made to mislead, frighten or hurt people" (Swan and Peattie 1989, 33.))? Peattie argues that the latter work need not be included in a collection, not entirely because it contains known falsehoods, but because given a limited budget, it is better to include items that strive to present the truth than deliberate falsehoods. The position in part aligns with D'Agostini's

right to truth, though is it a rejection of the right to truth, when Swan argues that inclusion of holocaust revisionist books allows patrons to come to understand why such history is created and propagated, the truth being knowledge about the creation and propagation of false narratives? It appears to be both beneficial (to those who would learn lessons in how to approach false narratives) and harmful (to those who would take the text to heart). How do LIS workers in this matter resolve "the complex and unpopular issue of truth and untruth in the materials they collect and make available"? How do alethic rights resolve or at least address this issue?

This ambiguity is reflected in the tension in collection development that is evident in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights (as well as that of many other organizations, though the expression of it may vary):

Consider the first two precepts of the Library Bill of Rights:

- I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.
- II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. (Library Bill of Rights, 2021).

There is a tension between the objective of providing enlightenment, doing something beneficial (i.e., materials to provide intellectual and/or emotional growth), and providing materials representing all points of view (nor those excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation), including apparently those containing disinformation or misinformation, which are potentially harmful. Should a librarian supply "information" that a patron seeks to defend their belief in a conspiracy theory? Is it ethical to do so? It is not ethical to do so? Are librarians and information specialists really neutral information providers? According to the paper, Ridi wants to make that claim to avoid "twin interpretations of indulging in propaganda and exercising censorship." The problem is that this bifurcation is often not so clear – no one is free of bias and acts of censorship or propaganda can hide behind "innocent" selection processes, such as not selecting works on diverse sexual preferences, radical political topics, or radical religious or anti-religious ideas, procedures for committing suicides, that the collection developer might assume would antagonize the majority of patrons. One grants that library consortiums and networks have reduced that problem of access to unpopular materials to some degree, though having local access may reduce the potential borrower's belief in a loss of privacy or sense of shame when having to use the library network rather than local access.

Testing the professional position of professional neutrality of librarians, one might argue that one has a right to disinformation or misinformation as well as the truth in the Age of

Disinformation. When a patron asks for "information" to prove that COVID-19 is a hoax, is the librarian to avoid the request (at a minimum) or to lecture them on the error of their ways (at the extreme)?

Let us consider the three alethic truths:

Sphere of Relevance: Information

Foundational Rights: AR1: Right to be informed truthfully

Reciprocal/Supporting Rights: AR2: Right to be able to evaluate and seek truth

Making explicit that human beings have a right to be informed truthfully is an important addition to the ethical framework for libraries. But, when speaking of truth in this context, does one mean THE TRUTH (the complete fabric that provides the context of a given claim or assertion) or do we mean truths, specific answers to specific claims (for which there are at least orthodox answers)? We have lots of information needs, and answering them may mean a specific truth (e.g., George Washington was the first President of the United States or Donald Trump continuously lied or Plavix is a useful blood thinner that helps prevent strokes and heart attacks). Truth can be a specific fact or a range of possible answers (what are the best blood thinners?) or the rejection of such assertions as COVID-19 is a hoax. There are truths in library collections, specific works making verifiable claims about their subject matters, there are opinions, there are outdated claims that are no longer true (the "science" of phrenology), and there are works of outright lies (e.g., holocaust revisionism). At best, we hope to satisfy both claims of the ALA Bill of Rights – materials for the education of their patrons and materials representing a diversity of viewpoints. How do alethic rights shape that balance? Does it have any influence on the impact of shaping the content that is available on the internet in public or academic libraries? The characterization of the notion of truth in the paper needs further elucidation. If a construct like alethic rights is important to articulate, what pragmatic consequences would result? Does it change what is done or will be done in libraries? It appears that librarians are mostly concerned with specific truths. Is this information source reliable? Does this documentary adequately represent the truth of which it purports to know? Are sources used to answer this reference question reliable and trustworthy, or are all approaches to this issue being fairly represented? Does the question about the reliability or authority of sources change if alethic rights came into view?

What complicates matters is that we have two kinds of knowledge, knowledge derived from experience and second-hand knowledge, that we acquire through the knowledge or opinions of others, various authorities that we acquire through life, whose assessments we accept based on their credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise (see Patrick Wilson's *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority*, 1983). These cognitive authorities can be individuals, references, organizations, religious authorities, media sources, etc. When patrons have a right to truth, is it the truth(s) that coalesces with their experience and/or their second-hand knowledge? In the Age of

Disinformation, partisans can believe as knowledge the second-hand "knowledge" (really opinions and often false opinions) of their media authorities: e.g., Fox News asserts that Trump won the 2020 election. Furthermore, if there is a right to information, is there also a right to disinformation? Parallel to a right to information, in the United States, we have created in practice a right to ignorance. Not only that: we, whether as individuals, groups or institutions like the government, have the legal right in the United States to disseminate ignorance and to block venues of facts and truth and smugly claim to present "alternative facts." We have entered an Age of the Anti-Enlightenment, in which knowledge gained systematically and through careful observation of the environment is rejected and replaced by arrogant anti-science, anti-humanitarian propaganda whose misinformation or disinformation is transmitted through print media, cable broadcasting, and social media. This approach raises some related issues in the second alethic right:

Sphere of Relevance: Science and Shared Knowledge

Foundational Rights: AR3: Right to be recognized as reliable sources of truth

Reciprocal Supporting Rights: AR4: Right to have access to reliable alethic authority

In the current age, there are undoubtedly legitimate cognitive authorities where librarians consult orthodox science reference works in dealing with a science question, for which they may not have first-hand knowledge. In such a manner, does Patrick Wilson talk about librarians as "authorities about authorities": even if they do not know the answer to a particular question, they seek sources that can supply the answer. Of course, if they had the knowledge or experience, they could use that. In political matters, there are the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* that, despite having a bias, present measured responses (and correctable, as demanded if evidence changes or evolves) to political questions. There are encyclopedias that provide a measured assessment of current and historical events, etc. What truths we come to believe are very much a function of those persons or institutions (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control) who have become our cognitive authorities. In like manner, one might argue for the existence of pseudo or false cognitive authorities which validate one's right to disinformation or misinformation.

A case in point is *Fox News* in the United States that has supported and perpetuated lies, disinformation, and misinformation that Donald Trump and his supporters have ingrained in their "true" believers. There exist two segments in American society, those who are educable and open to logic, evidence, facts, and reason and those that live in a filter bubble or "closed propaganda feedback loop" (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 33). For example, in October 2020, 97% of *Fox News* Republicans (78% of all Republicans) approved of Trump (Bump 2020) and most supporters believe that the election was stolen from Trump. More problematic is that 70 million Americans voted for someone on any rational grounds who is incompetent, arrogant, ignorant, petty, and cruel. To his supporters, it does not matter that all the states' voting procedures and results were validated, that all lawsuits (save one unimportant one) were rejected, or

that the electoral college validated the election. They believe that Trump was an extraordinary president and successfully handled the pandemic, based on the daily streams of misinformation from media sources (*Fox News* not only never criticized his actions and behaviors but actively praised them) and like-minded friends and associations. They are so convinced of their position that many were willing to engage in a civil war and to die for him. The insurrection of January 6 on the Capitol reflects their true belief, or to them, their true knowledge. Their right to a reliable alethic authority is to institutions like *Fox News* or *Newsmax* or *OANN*, which exist in a disinformation-misinformation ecology of like-minded religious leaders, political leaders, colleagues, friends, associates, party members, peers, social media sites, etc., whose views reinforce one another. They are psychologically inclined to pursue and click on disinformation and misinformation (more so than the center or the left) (Ingraham 2019). Their truth is tied up with their false cognitive authorities (media, religious, politicians) and like-minded friends or political associates in their misinformation or disinformation ecology. For details about the Trump Misinformation-Disinformation Ecology, see Froehlich (2020).

The point is that issues of truth are more complicated than an iteration of alethic rights and alethic authorities. When a patron approaches a librarian for evidence that COVID-19 is a hoax, a seeking originating from one or more authorities or like-minded friends within their disinformation ecology, does the librarian do everything in their power to help them find the resources (e.g., on the internet), or deter them? Democracy thrives on the truth, and taking a neutral stance or trying to lead them to a more orthodox view hardly seems adequate to confront the long-range consequences to such beliefs on the sustainability of democracies, not to mention getting a pandemic under control. Even the authority of institutions like the Centers for Disease Control that used to be regarded as the source for reliable public health information had their authoritative character shaken through the machinations of Trump, his enablers, and supporters, who turned matters of science into a culture war, where wearing a mask is an assault on one's civil rights, and vaccination is a plot to destroy America. Granted that what is happening in the United States is an extreme case, but it is echoed in other parts of the world (e.g., Brazil and Hungary) and unfortunately, as noted earlier, the United States is often a trendsetter for political interests who are intent on pursuing anti-democratic ideologies.

The third alethic right is the following:

Sphere of Influence: Culture

Foundational Rights: AR5: Right to live in an alethic society in the first sense: a society which, where necessary, promotes and safeguards the acquisition of truth

Reciprocal/Supporting Rights: AR6: Right to live in an alethic society in the second sense: a society that recognizes the importance of truth for the private and public life of social agents

Such a conceptualization seems to be a rational claim, except when one runs across such studies as Law School Professor Dan Kahan and colleagues on "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus" (2011). They looked at how an individual's deep-seated moral values and their beliefs about how society should be ordered shaped how they assessed scientific expertise or what they thought was a legitimate scientific consensus. They found that there was the existence of a strong correlation between individuals' cultural values and their perceptions of scientific consensus on risks known to divide persons of opposing worldviews. Subjects holding hierarchical and individualistic outlooks, on the one hand, and ones holding egalitarian and communitarian outlooks, on the other, significantly disagreed about the state of expert opinion on climate change, nuclear waste disposal, and handgun regulation (Kahan, Braman, and Jenkins-Smith 2011, 27). What this means is that who is regarded as an expert in science and the legitimacy of the rationales they provide for a specific problem varies with one's cultural values. In sum, what is reasonable or true can vary among individuals based on their background. Are librarians to analyze materials that suit the rationality sensibilities of either or both conservatives and liberals, so both versions of scientific truth or consensus exist in their collection?

The third alethic rights again seem simple in formulation but not so easy to implement with competing notions of rationality or in a society full of information-disinformation wars and where good science is turned into a culture war against individual rights and economic interests.

In sum, theoretically, the articulation of these alethic rights is insightful and a useful extension of the ethical implications of the rights of human beings, but practically it does not seem to offer more substantive practical activities beyond what librarians are mostly doing already. Most librarians would still have literacy programs (despite their low impact) and media literacy and digital literacy programs, or programs for developing critical thinking. Are they to be trained in the role of cognitive biases or gullibility or how to handle those living in "closed propaganda feedback loops"? It does appear crucial that the library programs and reference services poke holes in the disinformation or misinformation ecology of many Americans, though it is not clear that such adherents would spend a lot of time in libraries at all. Would the same be true of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists? How do librarians in accepting a "truth function" modify their behavior? While we can agree that the "true power of democracy is the power of truth and falsehood, therefore of the truth-function, and how we make use of it," what does that mean for a librarian, let alone media, in sorting out truth from fake news, authentic cognitive authorities from false ones, or what truth means to those in "a closed propaganda feedback loop" versus those living mostly in orthodoxy, or determining who are the experts and correct ones, all of which is establishing a scientific consensus.

While librarians should take care in achieving balanced collections, it is not clear that considering alethic rights would change much of their current behavior or

whether that change would enhance its impact. If there is a large demand for misinformation by the alt-right, should librarian collections include that? The right and alt-right have carved a narrative that asserts that social institutions like libraries and media giants like the *New York Times* exclude legitimate conservative voices. This is often reflected in challenges to certain materials in library collections (e.g., Harry Potter books promote witchery). Herbalists might be interesting in the herbal cure for COVID-19 proposed by the president of Madagascar, as well as those trying to understand the role and nature of fake cures. Such a work can have potential harm (if a patron believed it) or benefits (for those studying forms of quackery). The authors suggest that libraries create web pages that provide guidelines and list trustworthy resources that can be used for checking facts, and they do realize that many lack the education to know how to access and use such resources.

There is also the Dunning-Kruger effect. The Dunning-Kruger effect is the tendency to overestimate one's abilities. People prey to this cognitive bias overestimate their capabilities in assessing current events, particularly political ones. They think that they are competent thinkers, but they lack critical thinking abilities that allow them to understand that there are alternate perceptions of reality or that their critical thinking abilities lack a foundation. They are unaware of what they are unaware of and do not have the capacity to make themselves aware. While D'Agostini calls for philosophical competencies at all levels, it would seem as a first step that citizens should be trained in information literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy at all educational levels. Some libraries have been engaged in such programs, but it is not clear that, like information literacy, its impact has been or would be very deep. Would knowing about and endorsing alethic rights have much impact and the larger societal demands for combating misinformation or disinformation? If "alethic culture does not decide what truth is to be believed, but inculcates in members of the society a clear awareness of the use of truth to equip them with the means of disentangling what is true from what is dogmatically declared to be true." This seems to be circular; while we cannot determine what truth is, yet we can use truth to sort things out in our communications and sources. It is naive to think that all (even most?) users can sort out misinformation or disinformation by themselves in the (mis)information marketplace, the internet: many lack the skills to evaluate information critically or to assess who are proper cognitive authorities, or they fall prey to the Dunning Kruger effect by being unable to recognize the limits of their perceptions, much like Plato's Cave dwellers. The problem is that they are enslaved to their biases and resentments, cultivated by alt-right media to sustain their patronage and promote addiction to inflamed fears, resentments, and grievances. Tobin Smith, a former *Fox News* commentator, asserts the media institutions like *Fox News* foster an addiction to "tribal partisan pornography" (Smith 2019, 460–465). Heavy doses of information, media and digital literacies are not likely to reach

into their filter bubble or "closed propaganda feedback loop." It is not a matter of detecting the dogmatic "alternative facts," but to combat and challenge the false authorities and misinformation ecologies that sustain the acceptance, propagation, and authorization of those alternative facts, especially when those authorities disavow and condemn genuine sources of information. When they say "It is time for the LIS profession to engage in a discussion about user's right to truth and our concomitant activities," it is not clear what practical implications and applications would evolve or whether they would have any more impact. It is a useful construct, but its consequences or effective impactful strategies are not clear, in general or for libraries in particular. What effect will they have on Plato's cave dwellers who are committed to staying in their cave, as are many engulfed in radical right ideology and to a lesser extent left-wing ideology? Those on the left are less vulnerable than those on the right, who seek and are engulfed by right-wing media and ideology (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 14).

The second half of the paper seems rather quiet in terms of how to deal the coronavirus conspiracy theories. After a strong analysis of the conspiracy theories of the coronavirus at the beginning, the conclusion seems to be reduced to something somewhat reserved: we have to discuss more seriously the problem of truth in libraries.

We must grant that this journal is international in character, and its diverse audience might create a variety of responses, given their political, social, or economic context, but some examples would have helped for how the notion of alethic rights could inform their actions or policies. Proposals such as a librarian's (probably covert) refusal to find support for a patron's desire for proof of conspiracy theories (of whatever character) would seem, at a minimum, a library's response to the deluge of disinformation or misinformation that threatens the core of democracies. Reference librarians could undertake the roles that Socrates undertook in many of Plato's dialogs. In the Platonic/Socratic view of true learning, there are two aspects of the Socratic method of education. Socrates is presented as a stingray, electric eel or gadfly (to which he is referred in various Platonic writings), shocking or benumbing his interlocutors into an awareness of their ignorance about a topic about which they think they possess knowledge (as Meno in the *Meno* believes he understands what virtue is all about). One ask questions of the information seeker, to let them see problems with their query (shocking them into an awareness of their ignorance) or to lead them to more reasonable sources. The purpose of this shock in the first aspect is to clear away what one unidentified commentator referred to as "the conceit of false knowledge." In the second aspect, Socrates plays a midwife – using questions skillfully to have his interlocutors come to a self-realization of their true condition, guiding them to the birth of their ideas. Depending on how deeply a patron is involved in the "closed propaganda feedback loop," a librarian may be happy to achieve a state of benumbing the interlocuter into some awareness of

their ignorance. If the patron is not so enveloped by their own anger, biases and resentments, the librarian may be able to achieve more. At any event, there should be no cooperation in the justification of lies or misinformation. In sum, the notion of alethic rights is insightful, but it is not clear how they concretely advance methods and strategies in dealing with misinformation or disinformation in the libraries or outside of them.

Could the authors provide concrete options, ones potentially accessible and usable? They claim that they are not interested in specific recommendations and yet appeal to Robert Hauptmann in his concern for social justice. In *Challenges of Librarianship*, Hauptmann does make a specific recommendation: if a librarian or information specialist really thought a patron was up to nefarious activities that might cause serious damage, the library or librarians should report the patron to the authorities (rejecting the patron's right to privacy because of a higher social responsibility). Yet with regard to COVID-19, they make no specific recommendations about the COVID-19 disinformation or misinformation despite its significant consequences to the deaths of millions of persons (not to mention the disastrous effects of misinformation and disinformation in so many other domains), only that librarians should think about truth more, with the hope that a library or library system might take specific actions. It would have been helpful to suggest some potential ideas in dealing with coronavirus misinformation, such as the use of net nannies in curbing sites that promote hate or racist speech, the refusal to supply information that supports or perpetuates misinformation or to create policies or programs for curbing or at least challenging misinformation. Obviously, these approaches are not going to stop the problem, but libraries have an obligation to try to curtail misinformation so as to protect fragile democracies and public health that rely on truth and truthful authorities, including them. Professional silence and neutrality are not enough, given the onslaught of misinformation and disinformation and the ideological and broad rejection of expertise and proper authorities: there must be proactive resistance, if not outright repudiation.

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