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Disinformation in the Post-Truth Era: Epistemological Constructs, Social Contagion, and the Role of the iField

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Abstract

This paper examines the "post-truth era" focusing on fake news and disinformation, emphasising their role in undermining the foundational principles of science and society. It begins by distinguishing misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, setting the stage for a theoretical framework that conceptualises disinformation through the lens of the Indian epistemological concept of *Pramāṇa*, Floridi's Philosophy of Information, and Aristotle's Theory of Deviance. Additionally, the paper posits that contagion theories, such as those by Le Bon and others, help explain the spread of disinformation in an era dominated by social networks, making a case for Social Network Analysis as a valuable tool. Practical strategies and tools to combat falsehoods are also offered. Finally, it argues that the field of information studies (*iField*) must address this crisis by incorporating relevant content into its curriculum and education.

Keywords: Contagion Theory, Disinformation , Epistemological Constructs, Fake-News, iField, iSchools, LIS, Malinformation, Misinformation, Post-Truth Era, Social Media, Social Network Analysis

1. Introduction

This paper examines the disinformation phenomenon as a consequence of the information revolution and outlines strategies to mitigate its spread. It advocates for the iField (Information Field) to assert its role as the key domain for studying and researching disinformation. The paper is organized into four sections: (a) setting the context by exploring the post-Truth Era; (b) analyzing disinformation and its variants while constructing a theoretical framework based on interdisciplinary theories; (c) presenting practical tactics and tools to counter disinformation campaigns; and (d) positioning the iField to take ownership of studying this critical phenomenon.

2. Post-Truth Era

The concept of the 'Global Village,' coined in the 1960s by media theorist McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1994), became a reality with the advent of the Internet and the Web in the mid-1990s. The Internet created a truly democratic platform for information access and a "vanity press" that enabled the 'free' flow of information—putting the power of publishing into everyone's hands. This new reality allowed not only access but also the creation and dissemination of information on a global scale.

With the rise of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, characterized by two-way interactions, users were now able to comment, share, and interact, fundamentally reshaping the digital landscape. This shift ushered in the era of User-Generated Content (UGC), transforming the previously top-down flow of information into a dynamic, decentralized system. Sunstein (2006), in *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*, describes his vision of 'Infotopia'— Information Utopia—where human potential could pool collective knowledge to improve lives. Sunstein optimistically suggests that people can synthesize aggregated information without falling prey to herd mentality.

However, contrary to Sunstein's vision, where leaders and groups in "information cocoons" would be counterbalanced by self-correcting exchanges, a different reality has emerged. Instead, the digital revolution has enabled individuals to feel and act as experts on any topic, spreading personal interpretations of reality and worldview. This dynamic has solidified the post-truth era, polarizing societies and threatening the foundations of democracy.

Rather than promoting self-correction, the rise of disinformation has planted seeds of doubt, even within scientific communities. Oreskes and Conway, in their book *Merchants of Doubt* (2010), illustrate how a small group of politically conservative scientists played an outsized role in debates on controversial topics, engaging in deliberate obfuscation to influence public opinion and policymaking. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a repeat of this dynamic, particularly in debates surrounding its origins, such as the lab leak versus market origin theories. While the lab leak idea was once dismissed as a conspiracy theory, it has gained traction even as evidence builds that the virus emerged from the market, shaped by politics (Stolberg & Mueller, 2023).

The World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term 'COVID-19 Infodemic' to describe the spread of misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic, while UNESCO introduced the term 'Disinfodemic.' In response, the WHO launched the 'Let's Flatten the Infodemic Curve' campaign to combat misinformation, and the term 'infodemiology' was coined to study the phenomenon. Despite these efforts, disinformation — particularly on social media — has spread far more rapidly than accurate information. Posts from the WHO and CDC have garnered hundreds of thousands of engagements, yet these are eclipsed by the 52 million interactions achieved by hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Mian & Khan, 2020).

Lee McIntyre, in *Post-Truth* (2018), argues that this phenomenon represents an assertion of ideological supremacy, where the goal is to compel belief regardless of evidence. While the concept of post-truth is not new, the 21st century has become increasingly dominated by it.

The post-truth era is now undeniably real. The term was declared the Oxford Dictionary's 'Word of the Year' in 2016, a reflection of its prominence following events such as Donald Trump's election in the U.S. and the Brexit referendum in the UK. Both moments marked a significant shift, where objective facts were often overshadowed by emotional appeals and personal beliefs.

There is a plethora of studies on the disinformation phenomenon and the ways and means of classifying and detecting it (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). One disconcerting finding of many studies is that people's propensity to share falsehoods drives the spread of false news, and since increasing user engagement is the business model of social media, false information spreads faster and gathers momentum more easily, leading to a global crisis.

3. Information Disorder: Mis-, Dis-, and Mal-Information, and Fake News

The promise of the digital age encouraged us to believe that only positive changes would come when we lived in hyper-connected communities able to access any information we needed with a click or a swipe. But this idealized vision has been swiftly replaced by the recognition that our information ecosystem is now dangerously polluted and is dividing rather than connecting us.

The threat of the disinformation phenomenon cannot be overemphasized, as it weakens our democracies, social fabric, and health systems. Bak-Coleman *et al.* (2021) argue that the digital age, along with the rise of social media, has accelerated changes in our social systems, with poorly understood functional consequences. This gap in knowledge poses a significant challenge to scientific progress, democratic integrity, and collective action to address global crises. Therefore, it is imperative to study the disinformation phenomenon and fill gaps in our understanding, starting with defining 'truth' and distinguishing terms like misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and fake news.

Truth is a complex and debated concept. According to the widely accepted Correspondence Theory, truth is when words correspond to an accepted or mutually available reality that can be examined and confirmed. In its simplest form, truth is a connection to reality. To be true is to accurately describe, or in other words, match, picture, depict, express, conform to, agree with, or correspond to, the real world or parts of it (Rasmussen, 2018). However, the accuracy and authenticity of information have become casualties in today's world of information pollution and disorder. Unverified digital information not only sways public opinion about people, health, science, and current affairs but also influences perceptions and behaviours.

The challenge lies not only in discerning the 'truthfulness' of the information but also in the discursive construction of supporting information as truthful and dissonant information as untrue or deliberately false (Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). This construction has implications for how society collectively defines and perceives truth. The unchecked spread of unverified information poses real dangers to public trust in institutions and knowledge systems, often influencing social behaviour in ways that extend beyond the digital space.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), in their report for the Council of Europe, introduced a conceptual framework for examining information disorder, identifying three distinct types: 'misinformation,' 'disinformation,' and 'malinformation,' while discouraging the use of the term 'fake news,' as it is woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution. First Draft (https://firstdraftnews.org/) — a think tank — advocates the term 'Information Disorder' to better capture the types of content that plague our information ecosystem, such as propaganda, lies, conspiracies, rumours, hoaxes, hyper-partisan content, falsehoods, or manipulated media.

Each of these categories carries distinct characteristics:

- Misinformation refers to the unintentional spread of false or inaccurate information, usually without malicious intent. It may result from mistakes, negligence, or unconscious bias but lacks the deliberate aim to deceive.
- Disinformation, by contrast, is deliberately false information that is intentionally spread to deceive or achieve specific political or ideological goals (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Tandoc Jr. *et al.*, 2018; Wardle, 2020).
- Malinformation is based on factual information but is exaggerated, manipulated, or presented in a way that causes harm or misleads the audience.

These types of information disorders not only distort reality but also undermine democratic institutions, contributing to a growing sense of societal distrust.

The issue of information disorder — whether it manifests as misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation — needs urgent attention. These forms of polluted information have the potential to significantly harm individuals, societies, and democratic systems. Understanding the distinctions and impacts of each is the first step toward combating the growing threat they pose. The acronym MIDI (Mis- and Dis-information) has emerged to simplify the terminology.

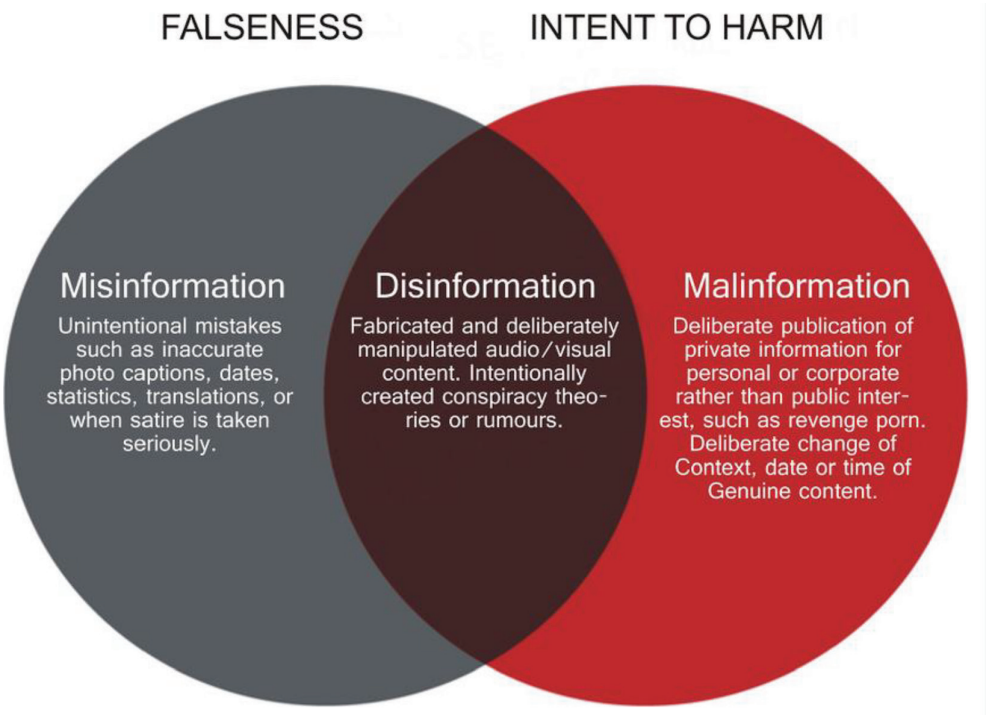

Figure 1. Venn diagram depicting the relationship between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017).
Source: https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=3238110

4. Deconstructing Disinformation: Theoretical Constructs

In line with Kurt Lewin's (1952) famous axiom, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory," I have developed a theoretical framework for conceptualizing disinformation (Urs, 2022). This construct draws on the Indian epistemological system of Pramāṇa, Floridi's Philosophy of Information, and the Aristotelian Theory of Deviance. My goal is to explore the intellectual origins of disinformation, positioning it as a form of deviant behaviour. Using Aristotle's framework, I argue that Gustave Le Bon's Contagion Theory and the concept of Networked Individuality provide valuable insights into the epidemiology of disinformation.

4.1 Disinformation as Unvalidated Information

Indian epistemology (Bilimoria, 1993) identifies six 'Pramāṇas' — methods for obtaining valid knowledge: 'Pratyakṣa' (perception), 'Anumāna' (inference), 'Upamāna' (comparison/analogy), 'Arthāpatti' (postulation), 'Anupalabdhi' (non-perception or cognitive proof), and 'Śabda' (testimony from reliable experts). The Pramāṇas provide a philosophical framework for recognizing disinformation as unvalidated or unsubstantiated information — information that lacks proof and is, therefore, not a valid form of knowledge.

4.2 Disinformation as the Outcome of a Defective Process

In Floridi's *Philosophy of Information* (2011), the focus is on how information should be created, processed, and used. Floridi also emphasizes the importance of examining what occurs when the information process is defective. Building on this, Fallis (2015) defines disinformation as misleading information intended to deceive. By this logic, disinformation can be understood as the result of a faulty process of creating, managing, or disseminating information, deliberately designed to mislead.

4.3 Disinformation as Deviant Behaviour

Aristotle's work on ethics and rhetoric, while not specifically framed as a "theory of deviance," offers essential insights into deviant behaviour in a community-based context. His conceptualization of persuasive exchange and contested realities align with contemporary symbolic interactionist approaches to deviance (Prus, 2015). Following Aristotle's principles, I argue that the intent to mislead inherent in disinformation qualifies it as deviant behaviour. It deviates from accepted norms of truth and trust in communication.

4.4 Disinformation as Social Contagion

Le Bon's 'Contagion Theory' (1895) provides a lens through which to understand how disinformation spreads. Le Bon suggests that crowds exert a powerful influence, causing individuals to lose personal responsibility and behave irrationally under group influence. This idea of social contagion, further developed by scholars like Robert Park and Herbert Blumer, applies to the modern spread of disinformation, particularly within online networks. In the digital age, social contagion—the rapid spread of ideas, emotions, and behaviours — plays a significant role in disinformation's virality.

4.5 Epidemiology of Disinformation: Network Structures

Sampson (2012) explores how community structures and network dynamics influence the retransmission of socially contagious behaviours. Research shows that specific social structures, like reciprocal ties or triadic relationships, significantly impact the diffusion of disinformation. (Airoldi & Christakis 2024). The topology of networks influences how quickly and widely disinformation spreads, making network design a crucial factor in managing the dissemination of false information. Dewey's (1916) view of society existing within communication underscores the role that networks play in shaping modern social dynamics. Today, with the rise of 'networked individuality', individuals engage in highly personalized communication while remaining embedded within global communicative networks. Networked individuality is a societal phenomenon that transcends the idea of the Internet as merely a space for vital yet closed online communities that provide social capital (Adolf & Deicki, 2015). These structures provide fertile ground for disinformation to spread across societal boundaries.

Disinformation is not merely misleading information. It is a deviant behaviour, unvalidated knowledge, and a product of defective information processes. Its rapid dissemination is fueled by social contagion and shaped by the intricate dynamics of networked communities. By understanding these theoretical constructs, we can better

address the challenge of combating disinformation in today's complex, interconnected world.

5. Social Media, Fake News, and Journalism

Social media, which gained prominence around 2005 with the advent of Web 2.0, has become a force for good, bad, and everything in between in our daily lives. It has also exacerbated the post-truth era by fueling the spread of fake news and disinformation. As Lembke (2021) highlights in her book *Dopamine Nation*, this has made us increasingly vulnerable to compulsive overconsumption. This addictive behaviour intensifies the spread of fake news, making it a pervasive issue.

While journalism has traditionally benefited from engagement with readers, over time, social media has become a trap driven by addiction. The algorithms that underpin online interaction and clickbait culture prioritize emotional extremes. As a result, news outlets began monetizing clicks by offering readers dopamine-inducing, sensational content that is easy to consume.

Ironically, some well-known quotes about misinformation are themselves half-truths. For instance, the saying "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes" is often incorrectly attributed to Mark Twain, Winston Churchill, or Thomas Jefferson. It is most likely a variation of a line by Jonathan Swift: "Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it." Similarly, the old journalistic adage, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out," is a reworked version of the original phrase.

Escaping the grip of fake news in today's world is almost impossible. Studies confirm that false information not only spreads faster but also penetrates deeper into social networks than ever before.

5.1 Fighting Fake News: Tips and Tools for Fact-Checking

Here are some practical tips and tools to help you identify and debunk fake news:

Simple Tips to Follow:

- *Check the Source:* Always verify the source of the information. If the source is unclear, pause and investigate further. The "forwarded many times" label on WhatsApp is often a clue that the message could be negative propaganda.
- *Be Wary of Forwarded Messages:* Fake news spreads quickly via platforms like WhatsApp, often leading to serious consequences. WhatsApp introduced the 'forwarded' and 'forwarded many times' tags to encourage users to critically evaluate the source before sharing the message.
- *Corroborate the News:* Compare the news with multiple credible sources to see if it is reported elsewhere.
- *Analyze Tone and Language:* Tone and language can be strong indicators of fake news. For example, WhatsApp forwards falsely attributing positive comments about Prime Minister Narendra Modi to a fictional New York Times Editor-in-Chief, Joseph Hope, were refuted by *The New York Times* itself. The tone and language of these forwards were clear signs of fabrication.

5.2 Effective Tools and Tricks for Busting Fake News

(i) *First Step: Pause and Search*

When you encounter any news or post, take a moment to pause and search the web to verify its authenticity and corroborate the information.

(ii) *Google Search*

- *Basic Search:* Often, a simple Google search will reveal whether credible news outlets have corroborated the story. This minimizes the risk of consuming and spreading fake news.
- *Fact-Checked Sources:* A quick search can also lead you to verified fact-checked sources. For example, *India Today Fact Check* debunked a viral video falsely claiming suspects in the NEET paper leak case were hiding in a Congress office. This could have been quickly revealed through a simple Google search.
- *Parody Accounts:* Ensure the legitimacy of social media accounts. For instance, a parody account of YouTuber Dhruv Rathee falsely claimed that Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla's daughter passed the UPSC exam without sitting for it. Checking the account details often clarifies such falsehoods.
- *Double-Check Social Media Accounts:* Verify the handles on platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and other social media profiles. Parody and fake accounts can easily spread misinformation. For example, Dhruv Rathee's parody account clearly states it is not affiliated with the original.

- *Check Dates and Places:* Be cautious of old videos or footage from different locations being passed off as recent events. For instance, an old video from Assam was falsely attributed to Rahul Gandhi's visit to Manipur, but this was debunked by *India Today Fact Check*.

5.3 Advanced Tools for Identifying Fake News

(i) Reverse Image Search

- *Google Reverse Image Search (https://images.google.com/):* Use this tool to search by image and find its origin or where it appears online.
- *TinEye (https://tineye.com/):* A reverse image search engine that helps find where an image appears on the web by uploading the image or entering its URL.

(ii) Verification Tools

- *InVID WeVerify Extension:* A browser plugin for verifying and debunking videos on social media. It provides contextual information, reverse image search, video metadata, and more.
- *FotoForensics (https://fotoforensics.com/):* Provides detailed analysis of images to detect alterations using digital photo forensic tools.
- *Fake Image Detector (https://www.fakeimagedetector.com/):* Uses advanced techniques like Metadata Analysis and Error Level Analysis (ELA) to detect manipulated images.
- *Forensically (https://29a.ch/photo-forensics/#forensic-magnifier):* Offers free digital image forensic tools such as clone detection, error level analysis, and metadata extraction to uncover hidden details in images.

(iii) Fact-Checking Websites

Several initiatives and companies have emerged to focus on fact-checking due to the massive spread of fake news. Below are some global and Indian resources:

5.3.1 Global

- *Snopes (https://www.snopes.com/):* One of the oldest and most respected fact-checking websites, researching urban legends, folklore, and misinformation.
- *FactCheck.org (https://www.factcheck.org/):* A nonpartisan, nonprofit site dedicated to reducing deception in U.S. politics by monitoring the accuracy of statements made by politicians.
- *PolitiFact (https://www.politifact.com/):* Focused on verifying political statements, PolitiFact rates the accuracy of claims made by elected officials.
- *Full Fact (https://fullfact.org/):* A UK-based independent fact-checking organization.
- AFP Fact Check (https://factcheck.afp.com/AFP-India): Provides global and region-specific fact-checks, debunking false claims like a decade-old video of Nitish Kumar campaigning for Bihar special status being shared as recent.
- *True Media (https://www.truemedia.org/):* Identifies political deepfakes on social media using AI.

5.3.2 India

- *BOOM (https://www.boomlive.in/):* One of India's leading fact-checking websites, committed to providing journalistically verified facts.
- *Digital Forensics, Research and Analytics Centre (D-FRAC) (https://dfrac.org/en/):* A nonpartisan media organization that focuses on fact-checking and identifying hate speech.
- *WebQoof:* The Quint's fact-checking initiative debunked a doctored image of Sonia Gandhi smoking a cigarette. Readers can send queries directly to WebQoof through WhatsApp (9540511818).
- *Factly (https://factly.in/):* Dedicated to data journalism and fact-checks. Recently, it debunked the false claim that PM Modi avoided seeking blessings at Anant Ambani's wedding due to opposition to the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

5.3.3 Additional Tools

- *NewsGuard (https://www.newsguardtech.com/):* A browser extension that provides trust ratings for online news sources, continuously updating its database to detect misinformation.

While fake news continues to grow, few Indian media outlets have taken firm steps to combat it. *India Today* is one of the only channels with a certified in-house fact-checking initiative. However, as citizens, we also have a role to play. By using these tools and following these tips, we can become adept at identifying fake news, contributing to the collective fight against misinformation.

6. Information Disorder and iField: Response and Responsibilities

Since the onset of the information revolution and the rise of the information society, as envisioned by sociologist Daniel Bell in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973),

the "information" field—or iField, a term popularized by the iSchools — has been continuously reimagined and rebranded. Today, it spans a wide range of subdomains, drawing from disciplines such as Library and Information Science (LIS), Computer Science, Cognitive Science, Linguistics, and beyond.

A recent paper by Urs (2023) traces the evolution of information studies, beginning with the post-WWII focus on Scientific and Technological Information (STI), through the emergence of information science in the 1970s, to its transition into the iField with the rise of iSchools in the mid-2000s. The strength of the iSchool movement, as seen in its organizational structure (https://www.ischools.org/), lies in its ability to integrate diverse ideas, philosophies, methodologies, and cultures. While many iSchools have roots in Library and Information Science (LIS), others come from different origins, with no direct connection to LIS but a focus on information.

A study on U.S. iSchools (Zuo *et al.*, 2017) revealed that the field is maturing into an independent discipline, marked by diverse academic backgrounds and research topics. Wiggins and Sawyer (2012) highlight computing as a central area of iSchools while acknowledging the broad range of intellectual activity. Zhang *et al.* (2013) echo this, showing that iSchool faculties are interdisciplinary, with dominant fields including information, technology, and management. Urs and Minhaj (2022) evidence the increasing focus on data science within iSchools' education and research, following a curriculum analysis.

A bibliometric analysis by Navarro-Sierra *et al.* (2024) examined disinformation literature, identifying rapid growth in research dominated by fields like Medicine, Computer Science, and Psychology. The analysis underscores the interdisciplinary nature of disinformation studies, highlighting the need for transdisciplinary collaboration. Notably, *Profesional de la Información*, a journal covering LIS, ranks among the top 25 journals publishing on disinformation, emphasizing the relevance of information science in this research area.

Given the complexity of teaching and learning about MIDI, the journal *Information and Learning Sciences* by Emerald called for and published a special issue in 2022, dedicated to the study of teaching and learning about misinformation. Recognizing that disinformation studies are a growing research domain across disciplines such as Political Science, Journalism and Media Studies, Information Studies, Communications, and Digital Humanities — and that approaches to its study vary widely —the issue emphasized works that transcend partisan arguments. It focused on pedagogically framed research, exploring how educators can engage students and the public in more nuanced discussions about information in mediated and socio-technical contexts. In this issue, Paris *et al.* (2022) addressed limitations in existing approaches to the study of MIDI and proposed a more comprehensive framework tailored to undergraduate learners, presenting a fully articulated syllabus for a course titled 'Disinformation Detox.'

After examining the spread of disinformation through social media and how network structures exacerbate its impact, creating a social contagion crisis, I believe that the iField has a critical role in developing frameworks to study and address this issue. With its intellectual heritage rooted in trusted information repositories, the information profession is well-positioned to lead research and train professionals to confront disinformation. The iField must focus on navigating the disinformation landscape, building the knowledge and skills necessary to identify its processes, contributing factors, and strategies for mitigation, while also developing effective techniques to combat its spread in society.

Framed within the broader context of information literacy, teaching information professionals about disinformation studies and equipping them with effective strategies for mitigating MIDI (Misinformation, Disinformation, and Information Disorder) would significantly enhance the value of Library and Information Science (LIS) education. This focus would prepare future information professionals not only to recognize and combat disinformation but also to proactively design and implement robust library user education programs that address these challenges.

By incorporating disinformation studies into the LIS curriculum, information professionals would gain critical competencies in identifying, analyzing, and countering misleading information in various formats and across multiple platforms. These skills would enable librarians to become active defenders of truth in their communities, positioning libraries as key institutions for promoting media literacy and information integrity.

Furthermore, developing specialized programs under library user education initiatives would empower users to become more discerning consumers of information. Librarians could create tailored workshops, resources, and tools to teach patrons how to critically evaluate sources, understand the mechanics of fake news, and

use fact-checking tools effectively. These programs would help bridge the gap between access to information and the ability to discern credible information from falsehoods, thereby fostering a more informed and resilient public.

Ultimately, integrating disinformation studies into LIS education would enhance the role of information professionals as educators, advocates, and stewards of reliable information in the digital age. This shift would not only reinforce the relevance of libraries in combating disinformation but also ensure that libraries continue to serve as trusted spaces for learning, critical thinking, and the promotion of information literacy in a rapidly evolving information landscape.

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