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Unlikely Partners in a Media Literacy Initiative

Abstract

Academic librarians are the ultimate interdisciplinarians, and would seem to be natural research collaborators, but many struggle to be seen as peers by other faculty or called on to fully partner in research projects even when key information literacy objectives are involved. This changed for an associate professor/librarian at Boise State's Albertsons Library when they were invited to join a team which was eventually awarded a Department of Homeland Security grant. This article examines the grant program, the grant awarded, and a librarian's contributions to achieving the project's objectives. It makes the case for libraries' essential role in strengthening our communities' resistance to the disinformation behind extremist belief and action.

Keywords: misinformation, extremism, radicalization, information literacy, media literacy

Misinformation and the Department of Homeland Security

A number of institutions, libraries, and researchers have categorized false and misleading information according to the intentions behind it, labeling erroneous information that has been mistakenly shared or used with benign intent as "misinformation," and falsehoods shared with deliberate intent to mislead as "disinformation" (Guterres 2022; Purdue University n.d.; Altay et al. 2023). For ease of reading, in this article all published and shared online information that is verifiably inaccurate will be referred to as disinformation regardless of the intention behind it.

Whether it is incorrect information being shared by users on social media, or coordinated efforts by malicious actors to spread falsehoods, disinformation has a strong ability to influence people. Political actors spread disinformation, contributing to higher levels of polarization (Piazza 2022), and disinformation is undermining belief in democracy and institutions (Frederick

2019). Even more concerning is the connection between disinformation and domestic terrorism. Basit (2021) found a correlation between belief in conspiracy theory and motivation to violent acts. Other research has established the connection between disinformation and radicalization (Garry et al. 2021). Doxsee and others also noted: "Virtually all domestic extremists use the internet and social media platforms to issue propaganda, coordinate training, raise funds, recruit members, and communicate with others" (2023, 8). With such easy access to a broad audience for extremist messaging and recruitment, domestic terrorism grew exponentially between 2010 and 2021, with domestic terrorism investigations exploding by 357% (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2023).

In 2021, in an attempt to combat the disinformation contributing to rising domestic terrorism, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established the Disinformation Governance Board, an advisory board that was intended to provide guidance to other agencies within the department regarding issues of disinformation. Some of the advisory board's specifically stated goals were preventing Russian-directed disinformation that had been widespread during the 2016 and 2020 election campaigns, and disinformation related to immigration that was perceived to be contributing to higher numbers of attempted border crossings. As an advisory body, the board had no direct authority to implement policy, but it still attracted a massive amount of partisan backfire from Republicans, who criticized the board as a government attempt to police free speech (Myers and Kanno-Youngs 2022). Less than a month from the announcement of the Disinformation Governance Board, it was put on hold for review, and eventually shut down entirely when it became apparent that the board would be unable to function in the face of such backlash. Despite this initial failure, DHS continued the mission in other ways, including the grant program funding the project that is the focus of this article.

In 2020, the DHS established the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) grant program. The TVTP program was established with the express intent of helping "...establish or enhance capabilities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). This is part of a larger range of DHS initiatives that have been undertaken during the Biden administration in order to try and combat violence that is being driven by extremism and polarization in our society. The TVTP grant program is open to a variety of applicant types and has a rigorous selection process. The selection process begins with examining the eligibility of the applying group or organization. Projects must also fit into one of two paths: Promising Practices, which has 8 sub-types, but generally encompasses preventative, community-oriented projects; and Innovation, which "approach[es] the broader goal of targeted violence and terrorism prevention in new or untested ways" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). The final selection process is then carried out by subject-matter experts (SMEs) in anti-terrorism, who score the applications and select the final project proposals based on the application score and other aspects like diversity in project types, geographic locations, and applicant types.

The grant award program has grown from 29 awardees in its first year (2020) to 43 awardees in 2022. The grants encompass a wide variety of the types of work that the awardees aim to accomplish, from university education programs, to true crime podcasts, to high school esports clubs. Generally, there are four different themes that can capture the main ideas of the majority of these projects: broad-based community education and outreach; narrow and specific community-based education and outreach; policing-focused initiatives; and non-traditional outreach. By far the most common type of project being undertaken by grant awardees is some

form of community-based outreach, which is defined by efforts to spread awareness and provide preventative education.

Among these different types of projects, the majority might be categorized as broad-based outreach, in which grant awardees attempt to make an impression on a large portion of the local population. A good example of this broader outreach is the TVTP grant project undertaken by the University of Rhode Island, whose target community includes members of faith communities, military spouses and family members, the public health and safety workforce, K-12 educators, librarians, high school and college students, and media and public relations professionals in a variety of programs (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021). The project which is the focus of this article would also fall into this category, with its primary target being students and educators from middle school through college across Idaho.

Despite the wide variety of approaches to the DHS grant program objectives, Albertsons Library at Boise State University is the only library directly involved in an awarded project in the three years of the grant's existence. This is particularly surprising in that one of the Promising Practices sub-types is Media Literacy and Online Critical Thinking Initiatives. The only other awarded project in the grant program that even tangentially involves a library is the previously mentioned University of Rhode Island project, which merely includes librarians among the many demographics that they seek to educate with their outreach programs.

The DHS Grant at Albertsons Library

The unique involvement of a librarian with the DHS grant program began when an associate professor and librarian joined a cohort of faculty in a professional development program at Boise State. The program provides faculty with the opportunity to begin building a research

community, gaining skills and a network of peers to help move their research forward in meaningful ways. Through the program, the librarian and a political science professor recognized that the combination of their research interests and experience could be used to create a proposal in line with DHS's Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program objectives.

The political science professor, whose research agenda includes a focus on violence and terrorism, was aware of the TVTP grant program, and led the development of the grant proposal, *Raising Societal Awareness, Media Literacy and Online Critical Thinking*. Primary investigators for the proposal included the political science professor, the librarian, and a professor in Boise State's Games, Interactive Media & Mobile Technology (GIMM) department, who led the first phase of the grant project. This initial phase involved an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) which was to be developed by students in GIMM and deployed at the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights' Idaho Anne Frank Memorial. The game was intended to use examples of disinformation from World War II to help strengthen players' awareness of, and resistance to, hate-based rhetoric. At the end of the game, players were referred to the Media Literacy Desk for more information, and this is where the second phase of the grant, the library phase, came into play.

As originally proposed, the Media Literacy Reference Desk was to be an office in the library staffed by trained undergraduates. However, this idea relied heavily on the successful and timely deployment of the game at the Anne Frank Memorial. It also reflected a commonly held and outdated idea of libraries as passive entities waiting for users to walk into a building. Instead, the librarian developed the idea of a Media Literacy Reference Desk into the modern, active, and potentially more effective Disinfo Squad, in which undergraduate students were trained to work quickly and actively as information literacy educators and influencers in the community. By not waiting for the completion of the first phase of the grant project, the resources reviewed and

created by the Disinfo Squad could be more quickly and broadly released, potentially affecting the local community rather than just the game players.

The grant team was awarded funding by DHS in fall of 2021 to begin work in 2022. The majority of the grant funds for the library phase of the project were used to pay the students of the Disinfo Squad for their training and work. One student also used their participation in the grant project as an internship as part of their sociology studies.

In addition to their training, objectives for the Disinfo Squad included:

1. Reviewing and updating a website of resources related to the project.

2. Producing social media content related to media literacy best practices

3. Presenting programming on media literacy best practices

4. Conducting research on topics related to aspects of misinformation as a tool for radicalization

5. Documenting and disseminating research through a presentation, an article, or a limited podcast series.

Disinfo Squad Training

Training for the students of the Disinfo Squad was conducted through an 8-week online course and weekly lab meetings. The librarian developed the course and lab agendas based in part on materials used previously in a 3-credit University Foundations course that examined disinformation and its inequitable effect on marginalized communities. Student work in that course clearly demonstrated a need for revised and expanded learning materials to help them engage more critically with resources.

The Disinfo Squad training course expanded on the University Foundations disinformation curriculum to include a 3-prong system of training in line with the latest research on interventions to strengthen resistance to disinformation. This approach included applying new methods of information evaluation, practice recognizing commonly used deceptive practices, and reviewing the complicated web of psychological, social, and algorithmic biases that work against us in the online environment. Each week the students of the Disinfo Squad had, on average, six hours of independent study through a course in Boise State's learning management system, Canvas. Assignments included readings, video, and practice exercises followed by formative questions. The weekly modules also included reflective questions to help students connect what they were learning with their current knowledge and consider how they might use what they learned in both their academic and everyday lives.

Students were also regularly required to complete a summative assessment in the form of a social media post sharing what they considered the most important concept from the module. These social media posts were included on the library's Facebook, Instagram, and blog accounts with the hashtag #DisinfoSquad. In addition to the independent study, Disinfo Squad members were required to meet weekly for a 2-hour lab. In the lab they discussed the materials they had engaged with, made further connections between the materials and their own lives, and planned on how to use the materials to engage the community with key concepts.

Lateral Reading

The Disinfo Squad training began with learning to evaluate information using lateral reading, a fact checking practice well-documented for its effectiveness in determining the context and perspectives behind online information. Wineburg, McGrew, and other researchers at the

Stanford History and Education Group (SHEG) have led the charge in testing and promoting lateral reading as the best means of improving middle school through university students' abilities to evaluate information online. In 2016, SHEG researchers published results of their first assessment of students' ability to determine the credibility of online information, finding that "Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: bleak" (Wineburg and McGrew 2016, 4). In later research the SHEG researchers compared the abilities of Stanford undergraduates, historians, and professional fact checkers. Those who most readily and regularly identified credible information, the fact checkers, used lateral reading to determine credibility (Wineburg and McGrew 2019). Since then, the SHEG researchers have developed and repeatedly tested a curriculum centered on lateral reading (McGrew and Byrne 2020; Breakstone et al. 2021; Wineburg et al. 2022) with proven results of the efficacy of this fact checking skill.

Lateral reading differs from the checklist systems that libraries and other educators have traditionally used for information literacy instruction, such as the CRAAP test (Blakeslee 2004), which relies on identifiers of quality such as dates, domain endings, the absence of advertisements, or the presence of citations. Instead, lateral readers quickly skim a site they are evaluating, then open additional tabs to seek information on the context and perspectives behind the resource in question. The fact checkers seek background on a resource such as funding, credentials, affiliations, and scientific reputation to give them a clearer sense of where the resource is coming from and how it might be used. Although many educators still decry the use of Wikipedia generally, professional fact checkers know that the site can be a valuable asset in lateral reading.

Fortunately for educators, SHEG has used their research to develop freely available, practical, and proven classroom resources and assessments with their Civic Online Reasoning (COR) site (Stanford History Education Group 2023). Materials from COR were an essential part of the Disinfo Squad information evaluation training modules, and among the most valued by Squad members according to their assignment responses, their focus on lateral reading in social media postings, and its place in the students' presentations.

Recognizing Deceptive Practices/Pre-bunking

While Stanford researchers have been at the forefront in the development of new ideas for information evaluation techniques, a group largely centered at the University of Cambridge's Social Decision-Making Lab have been major players in advancing ideas related to "inoculating" against misinformation by "pre-emptively highlighting false claims and refuting potential counterarguments" (Van der Linden et al. 2017, 2) Inoculation theory has been studied in relation to persuading people to change misinformed beliefs for more than sixty years (McGuire 1961). However, in 2017 the Cambridge group found that this kind of "pre-bunking" was also effective in the digital age, strengthening people's resistance to climate change disinformation (Van der Linden et al. 2017). In 2020, these scholars published research related to their development of "gamified inoculation" through the Bad News Game, noting the game's effectiveness in boosting the players' confidence and immunity against disinformation (Basol, Roozenbeek, and Van der Linden 2020). Subsequent research by O'Mahony et al. (2023) and the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (Schuster 2021), has confirmed the effectiveness of pre-bunking in an online information environment.

In their pre-bunking training, the Disinfo Squad played and evaluated the Bad News Game. Squad members' evaluations noted that the game provided a means of introducing these concepts in a way that would resonate with people in their age group (ages 18-25). The students also read, reflected on, and discussed both the Basol article and an additional article providing an overview of pre-bunking techniques from outside the Cambridge lab (Garcia and Shane 2021). The Disinfo Squad circled back to these concepts after completion of subsequent training modules on biases, finding that pre-bunking offered a potential solution to get past humans' bad habits of mind in relation to the acceptance of misinformation.

Bias Awareness

While lateral reading and pre-bunking have both shown promising results as strategies to strengthen resistance to misleading information, neither intervention will work unless people are convinced to slow down and engage with information online in a more deliberate way. As Pennycook (2023) noted "...a mere lack of deliberation and analytic thinking is a primary source of errors and… when deliberation is activated, it generally reduces errors" (1). Helping people understand the vulnerabilities we are all subject to may help in promoting a more thoughtful approach to online information.

To help promote deliberative thinking, Disinfo Squad training included a series of modules on the complex array of biases that make people vulnerable to false information, including cognitive, social, and algorithmic biases. Scholars at Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media (OsoMe) are developing tools aimed at helping people become aware of these biases as well as the outside influences attempting to take advantage of those biases, so the

Squad's bias awareness training included reading an excellent overview by OsoMe's Ciampaglia and Menczer (2018).

In a number of training modules, including those on biases, the Disinfo Squad training made use of the Checkology curriculum created by the News Literacy Project. This curriculum is free and is most appropriate for students in middle school through high school focused on news and journalism. However, the Checkology modules also served well as interactive introductions to the concepts being explored by the Disinfo Squad. Among the other readings and activities included in bias awareness training, an article by Tsipursky (2014), cognitive neuroscientist and founder of the Pro-Truth Pledge, was a favorite of Squad members. The students enjoyed the analogy of training the rampaging elephant of our automatic thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns to a more intentional way of moving through life, including the way people interact with online information.

Conspiracy Theories and Radicalization

The Disinfo Squad bias training then led to modules on the connections between biases, conspiracy theory belief, and radicalization. Students were surprised to learn through these modules that psychologists have developed instruments to measure personality traits, such as the Big 5 Personality Test. Although the use of such instruments has been under debate, they continue to be a tool for examining how personality traits might make people more susceptible to conspiracy theory belief. For example, Stasielowicz's meta-analysis of literature on personality correlates found connections between conspiracy theory belief and a number of personality traits, including the need for control (2022). Albarracin points to a number of studies that demonstrate: "The more disturbing an event is, or the greater the loss of control, the more likely that people

will endorse conspiratorial interpretations of the event" (2021, 208). In these challenging times, when change is the norm, and little is black and white, it is easy to see how anyone might be susceptible to conspiracy theory belief regardless of their personality.

Social standing also looms large in susceptibility to conspiracy theory belief. Our social groups hold enormous influence over what we believe, and research has established that generally humans will believe information shared by members of their in-groups over information from experts or scientifically verified sources. For example, Clark and others confirmed that this kind of tribal bias is innate in all humans, and noted that moral issues with a high degree of ambiguity are particularly vulnerable to social bias (2019).

Algorithms used in social media and search engines to curate and present information in relation to past searches and interactions online exacerbate the effects of psychological and social biases. Bak-Coleman et al. (2021) warn of the dangers: "Algorithms designed to recommend information and products in line with supposed individual preferences can create runaway feedback wherein both the user's information preferences and subsequent exposure to content become more extreme over time" (5). Matthews (2022) referred to these personalization techniques as "breadcrumbs to the extreme" as social media users are slowly, steadily fed increasingly extreme viewpoints even as they think they are doing research. Search engines also use algorithms to serve up information, and social media platform moderation is the most common target for those seeking to address the issue, as in Kornbluh's recommendations to Congress in 2022. Kornbluh (2022) noted the balancing act inherent in attempting to employ these solutions while also maintaining First Amendment rights.

As a follow-up to learning about human susceptibility to biases and the connection to extremism, the Disinfo Squad studied techniques to engage with people who hold beliefs based

on inaccurate information, whether it is relatively benign urban legends or more dangerous rhetoric from hate groups and others intent on division or even violence. Nyhan and Reifler were among the first researchers who established that confronting people about their beliefs will generally backfire (2010), so engaging with people about the disinformation underlying their beliefs must be approached carefully. Some experts' recommendations include the use of Socratic techniques, approaching a conversation with genuine curiosity (Basu 2020). Jarry suggests that questioning someone with a genuine intention to understand where they are coming from may help establish some common ground or even shed some light on those beliefs in such a way that someone might reconsider their thinking (2021).

Outputs

As part of the grant objectives, the Disinfo Squad and academic librarian produced a number of resources including: a variety of social media posts, presentations at the international, regional, and local level, programming at public libraries, a website, a limited podcast series, and a training handbook. The Disinfo Squad students produced 31 social media posts which were featured on Albertsons Library's Facebook and Instagram pages using the hashtag #DisinfoSquad. In total Squad posts garnered 228 likes. The Disinfo Squad students also produced three blog posts featured on the library's home page (analytics are unavailable for those posts). In one of the Disinfo Squad's culminating projects, group members created a limited series podcast, Disinformed, available on Spotify. The podcast's five episodes examined disinformation throughout history in relation to the ideas from the Disinfo Squad training with a few of the episodes featuring university faculty members.

Project faculty presented on the grant project and related concepts at the Pacific Northwest Library Association conference in August 2022 and at the international Multidisciplinary International Symposium on Disinformation in Open Online Media (MISDOOM) in October 2022. Members of the Disinfo Squad presented a showcase highlighting their experiences at Albertsons Library in May 2023 which was open to the public. Later that month they presented to the local chapter of the Association of Office Professionals.

The Squad also presented programming on campus and at Boise Public Library, using the Escape Room Game, developed by researchers at University of Washington's Information School. The Escape Room Game, which can be played virtually or in-person, uses a series of puzzles that players solve in groups. The game is intended to help build resilience to misinformation by "increasing awareness of misinformation techniques, encouraging reflection on emotional and cognitive biases, and changing people's attitudes and social media behaviors when engaging with problematic information" (University of Washington Information School, n.d.), which made it a useful resource well in line with the project's objectives. Additional programming was developed from the Disinfo Squad training and was presented by project faculty to library staff at Garden City Public Library and Nampa Public Library.

Among the most widely disseminated, and, perhaps, effective resources produced by grant project members was the Disinfo Debunking Station, a library guide which was originally created by Albertsons Library faculty members in October 2021. The guide was created intentionally as a community resource with very few of the included resources living behind the paywalls of library subscriptions. The students of the Disinfo Squad combed through the guide, evaluating the resources' currency, relevance, and potential for engagement, and making recommendations to remove some resources and add others. The guide had 500 views in its first

year of existence, but with the Student Group's updates and subsequent promotions on social media and through programming, total views have grown to 1667 as of November 2023.

The Disinfo Squad Handbook, an open education resource that gathers the eight weeks of the student's training through the university learning system into an ebook, was another broadly disseminated resource created in connection with the grant project. To date the handbook has had 608 page views. Going forward, project faculty will be involved in Disinfo Squad related training for professional organizations, at local high school libraries, and at a university lifelong learning institute for senior citizens.

Conclusion

Academic librarians have long been invested in information literacy instruction across disciplines (Mounce 2010). However, throughout the grant experience, surprise was expressed at a library being involved in not only a Homeland Security funded project, but information literacy initiatives generally. Librarians are absent from all of the research centers mentioned previously in this article. This is perplexing as librarians have such valuable experience and insights to contribute to a topic being examined at the national level by psychologists, political scientists, legal experts, computer scientists, and communication specialists. While research has made the connection between libraries, media/information literacy and strengthening our democracy (Kranich, Reid and Willingham 2004) and, more recently, between media/information literacy and addressing extremism (Alfida, Mariam and Rianti 2019), there is little that directly speaks to academic libraries addressing their communities' susceptibility to radicalizing rhetoric through media/information literacy efforts.

Clearly, academic libraries have work to do in promoting their expertise and establishing their place in projects such as the Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention grant program. None of the training described in this article is beyond an academic librarian's knowledge or abilities. Academic librarians regularly create information literacy curriculum and resources for virtual and in-person use as a key component of their responsibilities (Withorn et al. 2021). Through their reference and instruction work, librarians are up-to-date and broadly informed of their community's information literacy skills and vulnerabilities. Much of the current research on disinformation and extremism is quite discovery and theory focused, rather than concentrating on practical solutions (other than platform governance). This is where academic librarians shine; academic library research is largely practical in nature, focused on problem solving. Instead of waiting and hoping to be invited to the grant funded research table, academic librarians are fully capable of taking the lead to apply for funding on their own. Academic libraries have great potential to become leaders in strengthening their communities' resistance to the disinformation in extremist narratives. Why not take the leap?

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