STRENGTHENING LIBRARIES

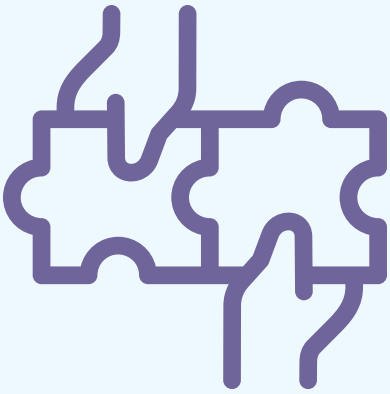
AS COMMUNITY INFORMATION PARTNERS

A RESOURCE GUIDE

Written by Elise Silva, PhD, MLIS
University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security

In Collaboration with Paula Kelly and Sarah Rouhan
Whitehall Public Library

University of Pittsburgh
Institute for
Cyber Law, Policy, and Security



WHITEHALL PUBLIC LIBRARY COLLABORATION

This guide and associated resources were developed by the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security (Pitt Cyber), in collaboration with Whitehall Public Library, a local library in Allegheny County in Western Pennsylvania. The collaboration was motivated by a desire to create practical resources that would be of immediate benefit to libraries in the region. Informed by primary research and a survey of secondary research regarding information trends, the guide was developed alongside practical social media material and templates, ultimately creating a working model of how a public outreach campaign to strengthen libraries as community partners might look in practice. The materials can be tailored to any library's unique needs and patronage.

Overview: Pitt Cyber

The University of Pittsburgh Institute of Cyber Law, Policy, and Security is a unique interdisciplinary hub dedicated to addressing the complex challenges of the digital age. By leveraging the expertise of legal, policy, and technical researchers across the University, Pitt Cyber bridges the gap between law, policy, and technology to develop actionable solutions for current cyber issues and generate fundamental insights into the future of the digital landscape. Pitt Cyber fosters collaboration with community organizations, policymakers, and industry leaders, ensuring that its research and educational initiatives are relevant and impactful, informing both practical responses to immediate needs and a deeper understanding of the evolving digital landscape.

Author: Elise Silva, PhD, MLIS, University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security

Originally from Seattle, but happy to have found a home in Pittsburgh, Elise Silva has a background in academic libraries as an information literacy program director. As a scholar, she takes a particular interest in studying the socio-technical nature of information creation, dissemination, and access. Elise conducted the research and analysis of primary data for the study that informed this project. As part of the collaboration efforts, Elise used the findings of her research to create the resource guide and draft the general social media outreach materials.

Overview: Whitehall Public Library

Dedicated in May 1963, the Whitehall Public Library strives to fulfill its mission as the community resource for education, exploration, enrichment, and enjoyment. The library resides within the borough municipal complex and is a system member of the Allegheny County Library Association. With a service area population of 14,785, the library provides a comprehensive variety of collection resources in multiple formats, as well as library programs and services for all ages. As a leader in community engagement and bridge-building between new and long-term residents, Whitehall Library was nationally recognized as a *Library Journal* Best Small Library in America finalist in 2019. The Borough of Whitehall is home to a significant resettled refugee population and with concerted efforts by its director, the Whitehall Library has taken a proactive role in establishing partnerships and acquiring grant funding towards services and programs for those community members.

Collaborator: Paula Kelly, MLIS, Library Director

Born and raised in the Borough of Whitehall in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Paula began working part-time as a page at the Whitehall Public Library in 1997 never realizing that it was the first step towards a new career path. After acquiring her MLIS, she became Library Director in 2009. During her tenure, both the library and Paula have received numerous grants and awards including the prestigious I Love My Librarian Award from the American Library Association. As part of the collaboration efforts, Paula lent her extensive expertise by outlining immediate needs of public libraries in their day-to-day jobs, and articulating her strong commitment to championing vetted, reliable information in an age of misinformation.

Collaborator: Sarah Rouhan, MLIS, Marketing and Communications Librarian

A native of New Hampshire, Sarah Rouhan first dipped her toes in the legal realm in Washington, D.C., before switching gears to pursue a career in librarianship. She moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2014, and has experience in both medical and academic libraries. Sarah has worked for Whitehall Library since 2016. As part of the collaboration efforts, Sarah used her social media and visual design skills to create the Whitehall Public Library social media campaign materials, providing templates and guidance that other libraries can use to tailor to their unique needs for a similar initiative.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to The Heinz Endowments for their support.

Thanks to Rebekah Miller, PhD; Lara Putnam, PhD; and Beth Schwanke, JD, for their review and insights.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction **5**

Section 1: Creating a Reliable Information Outreach Campaign **8**

Trust in Library Institutional Values and Processes 8

Trust in Library Resources 10

Trust in Librarians 13

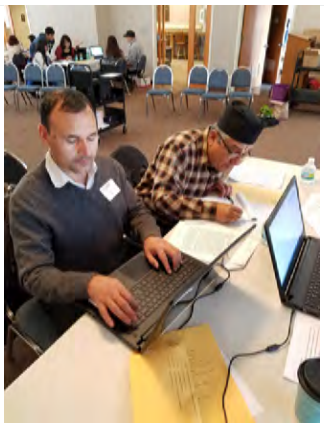
Section 2: Critical Conversations **14**

Conversation Tips 15

Conversation Template 16

Section 3: Curated Resources **18**

Annotated Resource List 20



INTRODUCTION

This guide is a product of a research study involving a series of interviews conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 with public librarians in Western Pennsylvania. The interviews revealed critical needs public libraries have in responding to a wealth of unreliable information online and building trust in reputable information sources.

Using an approach that focused on immediate, local, and community-based contexts, the interviews covered three key topics:

- **Identifying Misinformation/Disinformation:** Librarians shared their observations on the forms misinformation and disinformation take within their communities.
- **Current Programming:** The interviews examined current library programs related to information/tech literacy, with a specific focus on those addressing mis/disinformation directly.
- **Barriers and Opportunities:** Librarians discussed the challenges they face in providing services and resources related to these issues.
- **Looking Forward:** The interviews ended by exploring future programming plans and emerging needs in the ever-evolving information and media landscape.

While many barriers and needs were mentioned in these interviews, this guide grows out of two primary themes:

1 The impact of rampant societal skepticism regarding mainstream media, traditional information sources, and institutions.

Librarians reported many challenges in addressing misinformation due to its highly politicized nature. Librarians expressed concern about being accused of trying to change patrons' minds or imposing their own views when offering alternative perspectives or sources of information, particularly on contentious subjects prone to misinformation. Librarians also mentioned difficulties surrounding many patrons' willingness to confront their own biases and engage in good-faith dialogue regarding their information habits. In this sense, librarians articulated feeling responsible for educating patrons about misinformation while at the same time feeling unease and concern about how to address these issues with a public that might not consider such education neutral. As one librarian said, "we're in a really interesting position because we are supposed to be neutral and to guide people to the right resources, but we can't say flat out, 'that's wrong.'" Another librarian expanded: "At what point do you engage [with patrons sharing inaccurate information]? How do you engage? I think most of the time I haven't engaged all that much." This tension between neutrality and the responsibility to guide patrons towards reliable information has been amplified by the increasingly polarized information landscape, making it difficult for librarians to navigate this delicate balance.

2 Challenges around professional development opportunities for public librarians.

Constraints around time and available resources may very well affect the ability for librarians to access and participate in professional development opportunities regarding information literacy and mitigating disinformation. Meaningful professional development opportunities do indeed exist, and librarians have an interest, but limited institutional capacity (e.g. time, budget, and staffing concerns) means existing resources may not be utilized. Librarians also mentioned that the rapidly evolving trends in information ecosystems make it especially difficult to stay abreast of changes in the field. Librarians asked for education-based community partners to provide easy to implement up-to-date resources for helpful and practical ways to combat misinformation. Yet even with such resources available, it remains important to reiterate that challenges regarding capacity may not allow librarians to take part in robust and ongoing professional educational efforts.

While public libraries cannot be the only place concerted initiatives are taken to mitigate the use of unreliable sources online, as information access points, they can be one of the places. Given their remarkable impact on local communities,[1,2] this guide is meant to provide support to libraries as local information partners in the key areas identified above: first, as a response to rampant skepticism, we **outline a library empowerment outreach initiative** meant to remind patrons of the purpose of libraries as reliable information access points; second, as a response to the need for practical resources, we **provide templates for critical one-on-one conversations** with patrons regarding their information habits; and third, we **offer a curated list of up-to-date information literacy resources** that might be used to build teaching or programming within libraries.

[1] Horrigan, John B. (2018). *Libraries, trust and social capital* [White paper]. Urban Libraries Council. https://www.urbanlibraries.org/files/ULC_White-Papers_LIBRARIES-TRUST-AND-SOCIAL-CAPITAL.pdf

[2] Fox, Katie. (2017, September 14). Libraries are the most highly trusted resource for information on recent Pew survey. *Library Research Survey.* https://www.lrs.org/2017/09/14/libraries-are-most-highly-trusted-resource-for-information-on-recent-pew-survey/

Empowering Librarians:
A Reliable Information Outreach Initiative

Recent research in misinformation studies suggests that even well-intentioned information literacy interventions can sometimes backfire.[3] Fostering critical thinking is essential for digital citizens, but lingering on skepticism and over-enforcing a disposition of doubt can inadvertently contribute to an attitude of distrust which can actually bolster misinformation culture. This is because constant skepticism can lead to information overload and decision fatigue. Indeed, doubting everything makes it even more difficult to discern reliable sources from unreliable ones. It can also reinforce confirmation bias as individuals grow tired of complicated and time-consuming information seeking behaviors, retreating, instead, back into their own pre-existing beliefs and ideologies as a metric for reliability.

With this context in mind, instead of inadvertently over-encouraging skepticism, libraries need to carefully cultivate an environment where patrons feel empowered to develop a discerning eye for credible information. This means encouraging critical thinking about where to go for information, what processes create trustworthy information, and who to ask about reliable information. **Building trust, especially in institutions like libraries, is essential to this process.** We acknowledge that libraries have complex histories – including playing a role in historical discrimination and oppression. The public has lost faith in institutions for many good reasons over the years, with confidence in major U.S. institutions at all-time lows.[4] It is important to be open and honest about complicated histories, be empathetic towards a public that has lost trust in institutions for good reasons, and not over-glorify what libraries can offer.

> **"BUILDING TRUST, ESPECIALLY IN INSTITUTIONS LIKE LIBRARIES, IS ESSENTIAL TO THIS PROCESS."**

However, **we believe a balance can be achieved by highlighting the inherent values of libraries as spaces that have evolved to prioritize access, inclusivity, and the pursuit of knowledge.** Focusing on these themes will help showcase what libraries stand for and what they can offer in a way that invites the public to think about their information habits critically. By demonstrating the commitment of libraries to these values, we can build a foundation of trust that empowers individuals to confidently navigate the information landscape and make informed decisions.

To this end, **we contextualize this entire guide within the strong suggestion to focus on building shared understandings and connection rather than reinforcing doubt or skepticism.** While we all wish we could provide easy rules of thumb to fix the information ecosystems that surround us, the forces that brought us to this point require a significantly more complex approach. **We argue that focusing on reliable information creation processes is one way to address the root cause of misinformation culture by helping individuals come to understand what kind of information they can trust, where to find it, and who can help them find it.**

[3] van der Meer, Toni G. et al. (2023). Can fighting misinformation have a negative spillover effect? How warnings for the threat of misinformation can decrease general news credibility. *Journalism Studies, 24*(6), 803–823. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2187652

[4] Jones, Jeffrey. (2022, July 5). Confidence in U.S. institutions down; Average at new low. *Gallup*. https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx

Building trust happens at many levels from individual to institutional. As such, we have identified two potential approaches to trust-building efforts:

1. Reliable Information Outreach Campaign

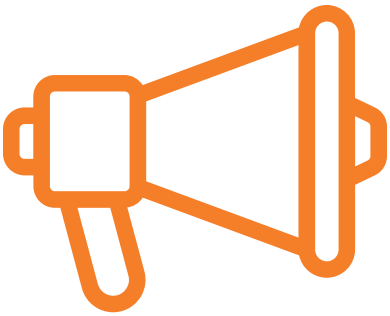
Section 1 of this document provides general guidelines for an outreach campaign focused on helping local communities foster trust in reliable information. These guidelines are meant to help you consider what content you could share with your community and are adaptable to local context.

2. Librarian Empowerment Project

Sections 2-3 of this document provide training support, professional development, and other resources for librarians regarding information literacy. These are in direct response to needs librarians in our interviews across Western PA identified. We provide these guides and curated resources with a careful caveat to try to share information literacy resources and base interactions with patrons within a framework of building confidence in trustworthy sources rather than with skepticism of all sources.

Campaign Examples

In addition to general guidelines, we wish to provide examples of what a Reliable Information Outreach Campaign might look like with a focus on trust building. As a collaborative effort between Whitehall Public Library and the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security (Pitt Cyber), we have created a practical list of social media posts, tutorial links, and programming examples in the form of our Appendix: Practical Resources to Help Strengthen Awareness and Understanding of Libraries as Community Partners. These resources follow the general guidelines outlined in this toolkit, but are more application-based and organized by outreach type and campaign theme. The document also offers general information literacy resources you can share as part of your outreach campaign to help educate the public on the responsibilities of being a thoughtful digital citizen. As you share these resources we invite you to ask yourself, *how can I frame this as a way of building confidence in trustworthy institutions, reputable resources, and trained information professionals, rather than a way of instilling fear and blanket doubt of all institutions, sources, and people.*



SECTION 1
CREATING A RELIABLE INFORMATION OUTREACH CAMPAIGN

Approach 1
Trust in Library Institutional Values and Processes

In today's world flooded with unreliable information and waning trust in public institutions (and each other), libraries are unique in their reach in their communities because they have maintained a meaningful degree of public trust and confidence.[5] Pew Research reports in 2017 that eight in ten adults say they believe that libraries can help them find trustworthy information.[6] There are many reasons to have confidence in libraries as institutions. Unlike the unregulated chaos of online information, libraries offer curated resources managed by trained professionals committed to accuracy. They provide reliable access to diverse knowledge, encouraging critical thinking. With a long-standing commitment to community service and education, libraries prioritize intellectual freedom and credible sources.

Libraries are far from perfect institutions. They have not been immune to discriminatory historical practices like segregation;[7] though they have also acted as important sites for civil rights demonstrations. We do not encourage you to gloss over such realities, especially if they are relevant to your own library's history. It's important to be honest about the history of libraries, as transparency builds trust. We can also recognize that libraries have evolved into institutions with strong values, which they uphold and enact. In fact, in some instances, their histories have shaped their current commitment to these values. Contemporary libraries are among the few remaining third spaces – neither home nor workplace – that serve as reliable anchors for community and belonging. They are well-equipped to respond to the growing uncertainty in our information ecosystems, making it worthwhile to trust in the institutional values they espouse today.

Maintaining trust in library institutional values and credible information creation and dissemination processes is one way to respond to unreliable information sources by encouraging patrons and community members to reflect on three things:

1. Why libraries exist
(their history)

2. What libraries do
(their mission)

3. How they do it
(their formalized and trustworthy information processes)

[5] Rosenberg, Stacy. (2019, July 22). Trust and distrust in America. *Pew Research Center.* https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/

[6] Geiger, A.W. (2017, August 30). Most Americans – especially Millennials – say libraries can help them find reliable, trustworthy information. *Pew Research Center.* https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/30/most-americans-especially-millennials-say-libraries-can-help-them-find-reliable-trustworthy-information/

[7] Bains, Jasminder, (2020). The hidden history of libraries and civil rights. *Santa Clara University Library.* https://www.scu.edu/library/newsletter/past-issues/2018-11/the-hidden-history-of-libraries-and-civil-rights/

Engagement and Outreach Materials*

HISTORY

- Share resources tracing the historic development of libraries in the U.S. and artifacts from the history of your own local library.
- Invite community members to share memories made at the library through spotlights or interactive polls/posts.

MISSION

- Highlight any awards, recognitions, or positive feedback received by your library from patrons or community organizations as they relate to your library's mission or vision.
- Highlight your library's mission and vision statements and connect them to tangible events, efforts, or outputs.
- Invite community members to reflect on the ways the library has helped them personally or professionally develop.

PROCESSES

- Share behind-the-scenes photos and videos showcasing the day-to-day operations of the library, such as staff organizing shelves, hosting events, or collaborating with the community.
- Highlight the standardized processes from start to finish that materials and programs go through to ensure they are of high quality.

* To view our *Appendix: Practical Resources to Help Strengthen Awareness and Understanding of Libraries as Community Partners,* visit https://bit.ly/4cq2oJ4 or scan the QR code below:

Approach 2

Trust in Library Resources

Public library resources are centers of trust and knowledge within communities. By providing access to a diverse array of books, journals, digital/print materials, one-on-one assistance, and public programming, public libraries empower individuals to navigate the vast landscape of information reliably.

Remind community members that library resources are vast and may be underutilized:

Books: Libraries house a wide range of books covering various topics, allowing people to explore different perspectives. Highlighting book genres or types that patrons may not generally gravitate to could be a helpful way to advertise diverse sources.

Databases: Many libraries provide access to online databases containing academic journals, newspapers, magazines, and research reports and patrons may not realize they have access to these valuable (and expensive!) resources.

Reference Materials: Reference materials such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and atlases enable individuals to quickly verify facts and can supplement a standard online search for these kinds of sources.

Assistance: Librarians are trained professionals who can offer personalized assistance, recommend resources, and teach research skills. Sometimes patrons need to hear librarians brag!

Digital Resources: Public libraries often offer e-books, audiobooks, and digital media platforms, providing convenient access to educational and informational content that patrons may be unaware of.

Archives: Some public libraries archive local collections that document local history and showcasing these resources could be a great way to integrate history with community-engagement.

Continued

Print Resources: Libraries often have other print magazines and newspapers which are increasingly hard to find in today's digital information landscape and provide a wonderful resource for individuals interested in consuming a wider variety of media coverage of contemporary events.

Workshops and Programs: Libraries frequently host workshops, seminars, and educational programs on various topics. Highlighting your current programs and creating new ones around media literacy could appeal to the public.

Community Partnerships: Libraries frequently work with community partners for literacy and tech programming, or other quality outreach work providing access to things like voter registration/education or tax preparation services.

Other: Libraries offer lending of other materials like video games, tools, musical instruments, and more; in addition, many are developing in-house makerspaces with features like 3D printing, typesetting, and sewing machines. Consider highlighting these alongside research-based materials to create more public interest and showcase the wonderful diversity of your collection, materials, and resources.

These resources collectively serve to equip individuals with the knowledge and tools necessary to make informed decisions, engage critically with information, learn about the past and the world around them, pursue pleasure and enjoyment, interact with their local community, and contribute meaningfully to society.

Build confidence in library resources by helping community members understand the following:

1. What resources exist

2. What the resources are good for (how they fit an information need)

3. How to access/use them

Engagement and Outreach Materials*

What information resources does my library have?

- Through pictures, videos, testimonials, or other media, highlight important or unique resources in your collection.
- Conduct book clubs, discussion groups, or reading challenges around contemporary, non-fiction materials.
- Feature Resource of the Week posts highlighting a particular resource along with a brief description of its benefits.
- Partner with local experts to deliver talks on specialized topics, such as public health or local journalism, showcasing the depth and relevance of library resources.
- Create displays featuring recommended non-fiction books about particular topics (e.g. public health or local history), emphasizing vetted information and reliable sources.

What are these resources good for?

- Trace a research question from start to finish, using a variety of online and print resources at your library.
- Produce podcasts or smaller tips featuring librarians discussing resources and how they can benefit patrons.
- Offer educational series on special topics (like local history) partnering with local experts and using collection materials.
- Create short videos or blog posts showcasing real-life scenarios where library resources were instrumental for research.
- Develop science literacy programming explaining concepts like peer review, its process, and its importance in fostering trustworthy science.
- Create displays and materials that explain how and why scientific understanding evolves over time, highlighting the changes in public health guidance that stem from new knowledge rather than misinformation.
    - Consider ways to involve the public with these displays by working with high school interns or other interested community members/experts.

How do I access/use library resources?

- Share short tutorial videos, infographics, or handouts demonstrating how to navigate the library catalog or online databases.
- Host themed events (e.g., Tech Tuesdays, Wellness Wednesdays) focusing on specific types of resources and how to access and use them.
- Provide live demonstrations or workshops on using digital resources and databases, making it interactive and engaging for patrons.

* To view our *Appendix: Practical Resources to Help Strengthen Awareness and Understanding of Libraries as Community Partners,* visit https://bit.ly/4cq2oJ4 or scan the QR code below:

Approach 3
Trust in Librarians

Public librarians are more than friendly faces in their communities. They are also trained professionals who are experts at finding, accessing, and evaluating information. Through a combination of education and on-the-job training, librarians are dedicated to fairness, ensuring equitable access to information resources for those within their communities. There are many different kinds of areas of expertise represented in public libraries including reference specialists, collection developers, catalogers, adult/teen/children's librarians, programming and outreach liaisons, and information/digital/tech literacy instructors. Because librarians often live in the communities in which they work, they also are aware of the unique needs that their patrons have and will work to create collections, shape programs, and develop materials specifically for them.

Fostering confidence in public librarians is one way to respond to unreliable information sources by helping patrons understand two things:

1. Librarianship as a profession and an area of expertise

2. Librarians as members of the community

Engagement and Outreach Materials*

LIBRARIANSHIP AS A PROFESSION

- Highlight professional expertise. Showcase the education and training that librarians undergo to become information professionals such as degrees, certifications, and ongoing professional development.
- Share success stories or testimonials from patrons who have benefited from librarians' expertise in finding accurate and relevant information for their needs.
- Showcase librarians' role in promoting critical thinking skills and building up healthy information habits through educational programs, workshops, and resources on media literacy and fact-checking.

LIBRARIANS AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- Share personal stories or anecdotes that illustrate librarians' dedication to serving their communities beyond their professional duties, such as volunteering, organizing community events, or advocating for social causes.
- Highlight instances where librarians have gone above and beyond to support patrons in times of need, demonstrating empathy, compassion, and a genuine commitment to fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Highlight the ways in which librarians doing their daily jobs demonstrate empathy, competence, and an understanding of their community.
- Encourage patrons to share their positive experiences with librarians and the ways in which they have made a difference in their lives.
- Overview meaningful community building events librarians have planned at the library.

* To view our *Appendix: Practical Resources to Help Strengthen Awareness and Understanding of Libraries as Community Partners*, visit https://bit.ly/4cq2oJ4 or scan the QR code below:

SECTION 2
CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

Critical Conversations about Misinformation[8,9]

Misinformation has, unfortunately, become a highly politicized topic. Librarians know this better than anyone. However, as information access points and public-serving institutions, libraries have an unusual opportunity to offer expert guidance in information behaviors. While considering these suggestions, we ask you to bear in mind the purpose of this guide, which is to build confidence, not reinforce doubt. Building shared understandings in one-on-one discussions with patrons is important because:

It is a gateway to dialogue: When patrons feel respected and heard, they may be more receptive to evaluating their information behaviors.

It fosters safe spaces for exploration: Exploration is grounded in curiosity and curiosity is the precursor to learning.

It is essential for long-term impact: Lasting relationships aren't about immediate results and practicing these approaches allows librarians to have a sustained, positive influence on patrons.

Shared understanding and mutual respect are the cornerstone of effective information interventions. While talking about these issues may be uncomfortable, here are a few ways to engage the topic with the goal of helping patrons become more reflective of their information finding and evaluation methods.

[8] For further reading on this topic from the University of Pittsburgh's Year of Discourse and dialogue, please see: "Difficult conversations: How to agree to disagree, according to a Pitt communications expert" (2024, March 27). *Pittwire.*

[9] The Committee of 70's curriculum on civic dialogue, "Can we talk?" may be of interest. https://seventy.org/youth-civics/can-we-talk

Conversation Tips

EMPATHY

Begin the conversation by building rapport with the patron by showing that you empathize with them even if you don't agree with them. Find and show genuine interest in their concerns and perspectives. Establishing trust can create a more receptive atmosphere for discussing sensitive topics. Listening attentively to the patron's concerns and viewpoints without interrupting or dismissing them can help patrons feel valued and respected, even if you ultimately disagree with their viewpoints. Acknowledging perspectives is a form of validation. This is not the same as agreeing with misinformation. Instead, acknowledgement is a mode of reflecting not only on what someone says or believes, but why they might say or believe it. It is a mode of saying "I can see where you're coming from."

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening means giving the speaker enough time to explain themselves, showing that you are intently trying to understand by your body language and reflective responses. Summing up what you understand the speaker has said is a good way to show you are listening and trying to understand their thoughts. Asking open-ended questions and clarifying questions can also persuade a speaker that you are truly trying to understand them, creating a sense of good will.

CLARITY

Defining the parameters of the conversation and being clear about what help you can or cannot offer is a helpful method to contain the conversation and redirect it. This might mean clarifying the reference question, or directly asking the speaker to state the purpose of the conversation. This is a gentle reminder to the patron about what is and isn't the purpose of your job, and it helps them reflect on their reasons for bringing a topic of discussion up in the first place. By maintaining the discussion within its relevance to your role, you will be able to both empathize with the patron, and also set appropriate boundaries within your ability to assist.

CONFIDENCE

You are an information expert. While patrons might get combative or might just be looking for someone to agree with them, your perspective and education uniquely qualify you to discuss how to find, evaluate, and use information. Don't forget that and be sure to gently remind patrons of this expertise. You might mention having helped previous patrons with this same question or talk about how you were doing research for yourself about it. Should a patron become combative or seek to enter into debates with you, it is ok to reassert your expertise, agree to disagree, and disengage. Ultimately, expertise inspires confidence, composure diffuses tension, and assertiveness establishes boundaries.

LANGUAGE

Given the politics of using diction like *fake news* or *disinformation*, avoid this language. The words we use can significantly impact the effectiveness of our communication. Instead, framing discussions in terms of digital skills or media literacy might provide a different entry point that would allow you to engage with individuals who would take issue with the polarizing nature of these terms. Focusing on methods and processes of information finding and evaluation rather than definitions of right or wrong brings the conversation back to behaviors instead of beliefs. This is helpful because beliefs define identities and ideologies and are much harder to influence than habits. Choose more accessible entry points into the discussion by starting from shared understandings.

REFLECTION

At the end of the conversation having a meta-moment of reflection where you sum up what your conversation was about, what was learned, and where to go from there helps the patron more concretely take away transferable skills from one information-finding situation to another.

Conversation Template

Addressing Misinformation

The following scenario displays some of the above-described methods for discussing potentially unreliable information a patron may encounter. You will notice that not all the methods are used. What the example does show is an ability to connect with a patron, focus on information-finding processes, and direct the conversation in a confident/controlled manner.

SCENARIO: A patron approaches the reference desk and expresses strong opinions based on inaccurate/misleading information they encountered online.

Sample responses:

- **Active listening:** (Listen attentively to the patron's concerns and acknowledge their perspective) "I understand your concerns about [topic]. It's certainly a complex issue."
- **Open-ended question:** "Can you tell me more about the information you found?"
- **Source evaluation processes:** "Can you help me understand the source of the information? Do you know who published this information and what their credentials are?"
- **Recontextualize to shift away from cherry-picking/rabbit-holes:** "It sounds like the bigger question you are interested in is XX. You've heard that YY, and it's sparked your interest in understanding this broader question of how ZZ."
- **Focus on information processes:** "Let's see if we can confirm this information using other sources. We have access to several databases and news outlets that apply professional journalism standards." Possible contextualizing extension: "They may give more context on the specific issue of YY, and also give a clearer understanding of how ZZ works."
- **Offer alternative perspectives and garner patron consent to keep going:** "There may be different viewpoints on this issue. Would you be interested in exploring other sources about this issue?"
- **Reflect:** "Today we were able to clarify your question regarding [topic] by using [database/media] sources. Do you have any more questions about how to use these library resources in the future?"

Continued

If the patron becomes argumentative:

- **Set boundaries:** "I appreciate your passion for this topic, but it's important to have a respectful conversation. We can disagree, but we must be respectful of each other."
- **Calmly converse, even if spoken over:** "Oh, I'm sorry. It was hard to hear you when I was talking. Can you repeat that?"[10]
- **Offer alternative resources:** "If you'd like to explore this further, I can recommend some reliable fact-checking websites or subject specialists who can provide additional insights."
- **Disengage if necessary:** "I understand this is a sensitive topic, and I respect your right to your opinion. However, if the conversation becomes disruptive, we'll need to disengage or change the subject."

[10] Credit for this phrase goes to Sam Helmick during their presentation on Friday, April 5, 2024, entitled "Choose Your Own Adventure: Intellectual Freedom Edition", during the 2024 Public Library Association Conference in Columbus, Ohio.

SECTION 3
CURATED RESOURCES

Share Resources Thoughtfully

While discussing the needs of public librarians in combating unreliable source material, many we interviewed suggested the need for a list of resources they could consult for educational material. Many robust information literacy resources exist, and we compile some of them here. As you consult them, **we encourage you to remember the purpose of this guide: not to sow doubt, but to bolster confidence in trustworthy values, processes, resources, and professionals.**

For example, while it may be tempting to share rules of thumb or easy guides to spotting AI-generated content or various forms of unreliable information, the truth is the information environment is changing so quickly that focusing on where to find reliable, vetted information might be better than reinforcing the narrative that *you just can't trust anything these days.* **We therefore urge you to focus on empowering and positive language in any guide or resource you share that has to do with patron information habits.**

Librarians we interviewed for our study mentioned having productive conversations about politicized topics by focusing on other entry points (besides spotting mis/disinformation) which still involved information literacy skills. To that end, using neutral language may encourage individuals to engage more positively with information literacy materials. We suggest considering how to frame discussions, programming, or social media interactions around common concerns to foster better engagement rather than invoking mis/disinformation terminology outright.

Areas of shared concern

SCAMS

Talking about scams is a great way to start conversations about being careful about what you see and hear, both online and in the real world. By learning how to spot scams, people can develop skills to tell if information is trustworthy or not. Many librarians talked about older populations needing significant help with this issue and building information literacy skills into such discussions may be a useful entry point.

TEACHING KIDS & TEENS ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Helping young people learn how to use social media safely and responsibly opens the door to discussing how to evaluate information online. This can include things like checking where information comes from and thinking critically about what they see and share. Ultimately sessions aimed at parents and grandparents around "what are young people seeing these days" or sessions that teach youth about these issues can both help them and prompt older patrons to reflect on their own information behaviors.

AI

With the rise of AI-generated content, it's important to understand how this technology works and its potential impact on the information we encounter. Discussing AI provides an opportunity to explore the changing information landscape and the importance of critical thinking skills in navigating it effectively. For now, patrons might approach AI with some apprehension, but also curiosity and interest. Seeing this curiosity as an opportunity for open discussions about information processes can be a great way to begin critical conversations about information landscapes.

HEALTH

Health concerns affect all people in their lifetimes and offer a unique opportunity to discuss information literacy behaviors. When symptoms first manifest, instinct often directs individuals to search the internet for a cause. While no website should fully replace a conversation with a clinician, encouraging better information-seeking behaviors leads to better health decisions – and given the sincere need for such information – patrons may be willing to practice new information habits to inform better health understanding. Teaching patrons to swap "Dr. Google"[11] for reliable resources can contribute to these positive outcomes by building health information literacy. Sessions about how to talk to healthcare providers or even how to better understand Google search results (e.g., how past searches impact results or how sponsored content impacts searching) could also help empower users looking for reliable health information.

We also remind you that many of these resources are linked in our Appendix Document* which has real life templates for short (social media), medium (tutorials, videos, etc.), or long (newsletters or programming) outreach and engagement materials. It also offers real life examples from a partnership with Whitehall Public Library in Allegheny County. We urge you to use these as inspiration and adapt as makes sense for your own trust building needs and patron contexts.

Though we appreciate your attribution when sharing information from this guide, especially with other libraries, no attribution for the media campaign materials is necessary when sharing them with the public.

[11] Starcevic V. (2023). Keeping Dr. Google under control: how to prevent and manage cyberchondria. *World Psychiatry,* 22(2), 233–234. https://doi-org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/wps.21076

* To view our *Appendix: Practical Resources to Help Strengthen Awareness and Understanding of Libraries as Community Partners,* visit https://bit.ly/4cq2oJ4 or scan the QR code below:

Annotated Resource List

ALA

Super Searchers Toolkit

The Super Searchers Program, initiated by the Public Library Association in collaboration with Google, offers a very versatile training toolkit for library staff to enhance information literacy skills specific to web searching. The program aims to equip librarians with effective strategies to navigate and critically evaluate online information. Developed in consultation with University of Washington researcher Mike Caulfield, a media literacy specialist, the toolkit includes slide decks, booklet guides, video tutorials, and webinar recordings.

Fighting Misinformation in ALA Library Collection

This collection offers a robust bibliography of books, articles, magazines, and other resources regarding misinformation and information literacy.

ALA Evaluating Information LibGuide

This LibGuide is an ALA-collected list of evaluation toolkits, programming, and guides.

Information and Media Literacy Nonprofit Organizations

Poynter Media Wise Website

The Poynter Institute is a global nonprofit that strengthens democracy by improving the relevance, ethical practice, and value of journalism. They offer educational materials including lesson plans and videos, aimed at empowering individuals to critically evaluate information. Of special interest may be their partnership with ALA to create Be Media Wise: The Misinformation Resilience Toolkit.

Digital Inquiry Group's Civic Online Reasoning Curriculum

The Digital Inquiry Group (previously The Stanford History Education Group) is an educational research and development organization based at Stanford University. They focus on improving digital awareness by developing innovative curriculum materials and instructional strategies. This collection of resources teaches digital "civic online reasoning" information literacy skills for youth navigating the web.

News Literacy Project

This website belongs to the News Literacy Project (NLP), a nonpartisan national education nonprofit. NLP aims to teach students how to discern credible information from misinformation in the digital age. Resources include interactive games, lesson plans, and virtual classroom experiences.

PBS News and Media Literacy Collection

This website is a part of PBS learning resources, featuring a collection focused on news and media literacy, particularly addressing fake news. It offers a range of educational resources, including videos, lesson plans, and interactive activities, designed to help students critically analyze news sources and navigate the modern media landscape.

Stony Brook University Center for News Literacy

This website belongs to the Center for News Literacy (CNL) at Stony Brook University School of Journalism, dedicated to promoting news literacy education globally. CNL offers a wealth of resources for educators, including public librarians, such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and research articles.

Check, Please! Starter Course

This course is designed to help individuals develop critical thinking skills for evaluating information. Through interactive lessons and exercises, it aims to empower users, including public librarians, to assess the credibility of sources and identify misinformation. Development of this website concept is funded in part by RTI International and the Rita Allen Foundation via the Misinformation Solutions Forum Prize.

Programming Librarian Website

Free Practitioners' Guide and Webinars

This resource includes strategies and discussion points for combating misinformation in public library settings. It outlines program ideas such as exploring the history of fake news, analyzing social media and tech tools used for deception, teaching strategies for being a savvy information consumer, and addressing health misinformation, particularly related to COVID-19. Additionally, it provides discussion questions regarding the role of money, the sources of misinformation, why people share unverified information, breaking free from filter bubbles, and the impact of misinformation on democracy.

Academic LibGuides

California State Long Beach

This LibGuide provides an extended reference list of other academic LibGuides built around misinformation resources.

UCLA Library

This online toolkit avoids easy answers or rules of thumb and focuses its curriculum on sparking critical thinking and discussion.

Health Specific Resources

Medline Plus

Medline Plus offers high-quality, easily accessible health information that has been vetted by the National Library of Medicine as well as a topic page on how to evaluate health information.

Consumer and Patient Health Information Services

The Medical Library Association (MLA) offers a curated list of top health websites, evaluated for credibility, sponsorship, content, audience, and design. This resource helps users find reliable health information on various topics, including general health, specific conditions, mental health, and more. It also includes community-specific resources and self-advocacy tools to assist patients and caregivers in navigating health information effectively.

Health Feedback

Health Feedback is a global network of scientists dedicated to verifying the accuracy of health and medical information in the media. The website provides evidence-based reviews of claims and articles, helping readers discern trustworthy news. By evaluating the credibility of health information and explaining scientific concepts, Health Feedback aims to promote informed decision-making and counter misinformation.

Health Literacy Toolkit

The Health Literacy Toolkit provided by the American Library Association's "I Love Libraries" initiative supports librarians in promoting health literacy. This resource includes customizable posters, social media graphics, and programming ideas to help libraries offer reliable health information. It also provides strategies for community engagement through partnerships and educational events, enhancing libraries' roles as essential health information hubs.

University of
Pittsburgh

Institute for
Cyber Law, Policy, and Security