Information Verification in the Digital Age: The News Library Perspective

Nora Martin, New South Wales Ministry of Health

This book will contemplate the nature of our participatory digital media culture, the diversity of actors involved, and how the role of the news librarian has evolved – from information gatekeeper to knowledge networker; collaborating and facilitating content creation with print and broadcast media professionals. It will explore how information professionals assist in the newsroom, drawing on the author’s experiential knowledge as an embedded research librarian in the media industry. The past decade has seen significant changes in the media landscape. Large media outlets have traditionally controlled news and information flows, with everyone obtaining news via these dominant channels. In the digital world, the nature of what constitutes news has changed in fundamental ways. Social media and technologies such as crowdsourcing now play a pivotal role in how broadcast media connects and engages with their audiences.

The book will focus on news reporting in the age of social media, examining the significance of verification and evaluating social media content from a journalistic and Information Science (IS) perspective. With such an emphasis on using social media for research, it is imperative to have mechanisms in place to make sure that information is authoritative before passing it on to a client as correct and accurate. Technology innovation and the 24/7 news cycle are driving forces compelling information professionals and journalists alike to adapt and learn new skills. The shift to tablets and smartphones for communication, news and entertainment has dramatically changed the library and media landscape. Finally, the book will consider automated journalism and examine future roles for news library professionals in the age of digital social media.

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Information Verification in the Digital Age

The News Library Perspective
Editor

**Hema Ramachandran,** *California State University, Long Beach,* and **Joe Murphy,**
*Director Library Futures, Innovative Interfaces and Technology Trend Analyst.*

This series, *Emerging Trends in Librarianship* (a sub-series of the *Synthesis Lectures on Library Science and Librarianship*), will focus on new and emerging trends in digital collections and new technologies as they relate to the practice of librarianship and library science. The series will be of interest not only to librarians and information professionals, but also to the research community in general. Topics include but are not limited to: eScience, institutional repositories, data curation, advances in discovery tools, taxonomy and thesauri construction, mobile technologies, and the newest topic of “near field communication.”

**Information Verification in the Digital Age: The News Library Perspective**

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Information Verification in the Digital Age

The News Library Perspective

Nora Martin
NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia

SYNTHESIS LECTURES ON EMERGING TRENDS IN LIBRARIANSHIP #4
ABSTRACT
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KEYWORDS
information verification, digital culture, embedded librarian, digital journalism, news sources, newspaper and media libraries, new media ecology, news reporting, social media
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my father, Dr. Kenneth Vincent Martin (1932–2008), who taught me the values of persistence and patience, instilling a hard work ethic. In 1957, Ken was awarded his Ph.D. in Organic Chemistry from the University of Sydney at just 24 years of age. My father subsequently undertook his post-doctoral research at the University of Illinois, and was employed as a Research Chemist based in Delaware. Our family moved to Australia in 1968. As a dual U.S./Australian citizen, it has always been a dream of mine to work in North America, so perhaps this tome may help to pave the way.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Newspaper and media libraries have existed since the advent of the print and broadcast media industry, but declining newspaper revenues in conjunction with technical advances have vastly changed the work of the news library professional in the digital age.

While the Internet can be a great resource for locating information, it is often difficult to know what trustworthy sites to consult in order to find the material that you are looking for. For example, many websites pronouncing themselves to be an authoritative source for federal government information actually have out-of-date or factually incorrect information listed. Finding those that are relevant and reliable can often be a challenging task.

Over the last decade, social media has become a fundamental part of our daily lives and professional activities. At the same time, there have been changes within the librarianship profession, such as the effects of social media on information sharing. This book explores a very critical aspect of the skill sets that citizens—especially “digital natives” need to develop in order to be credible and efficient communicators: the notion of information verification.

1.1 WHAT IS INFORMATION VERIFICATION?

News librarians, now usually referred to as news researchers (Barreau, 2005), are information professionals for whom information interaction is an essential part of their everyday work practices. Therefore the need to verify an individual’s credibility, authenticity, and organizational affiliation applies to both librarians and journalists (Ojala, 2014). News researchers play a crucial role in the investigative process. Often they work collaboratively with print and broadcast media professionals to find authoritative information from secondary sources (Houston, 2009), such as an indexed clippings library, via digital repositories, or by performing routine and complex database searches.

Journalists need to check facts by validating and interpreting information. As one of the virtues of traditional journalism, verification is the resolve by reporters to examine evidence and test the veracity of any assertions that are made. In this context, interpreting often includes triangulating information from multiple sources (Blandford and Attfield, 2010; Shapiro et al., 2013). “Source triangulation” is a social scientific method that sets out to prove or disprove a hypothesis through triangulation of infor-
1. INTRODUCTION

Information from numerous sources and analysis of primary sources of official documents. Evidence-based practice is at the core of journalistic endeavours, with “information gathered according to rigorous principles and presented in the formats of conventional science” (Olsson, 2014: 81–82).

1.2 INFORMATION VERIFICATION AS A “CIRCULAR” PROCESS

Reveal\(^1\) is an organization developing tools and services that aid in social media verification. As Reveal (2014) cites, one of the key findings of a pilot research study by Martin (2014) into the information practices of journalists is that verification becomes a circular process. In this study, participants agreed it was imperative to verify information and sources, noting that this was often a rigorous process until they were happy with the results (Martin, 2014):

“… you verify what they tell you by cross checking and triple checking pieces of information, different sources that are unrelated preferably and that way you can cross check and verify and triangulate pieces of information, determine whether that piece of information is accurate or not…”

Due to the dynamic nature of the news gathering cycle, it may be necessary to relocate information that was initially discarded due to evolving requirements, or as new facts emerge. Consequently there is often an ongoing process of “identifying needs, finding and interpreting information that repeats before the information is used” (Blandford and Attfield 2010: 32–33).

While the filter is an apt metaphor for the model illustrating the steps in the news gathering process as displayed in Figure 1.1, there is an increased amount of information flow between the collection and verification/analysis stages due to the iterative nature of the news gathering process—this illustrates that information verification is a circular process.

\(^1\) http://revealproject.eu/about-reveal/.
1.3 SCOPE OF THIS BOOK’S DISCUSSION

This book is intended to give a comprehensive overview on issues of information verification\(^2\) in the digital age within the context of media librarianship. Chapter 2 explores how information professionals assist in the newsroom, looking at the places that journalists often get “stuck” when doing their research. Building on this theme, Chapter 3 discusses news reporting in the age of social media, looking at how technology innovation and the 24/7 news cycle are driving forces compelling news researchers and reporters alike to adapt and learn new skills. Due to an increased emphasis on the principles of co-creation and crowdsourcing, Chapter 4 examines the significance of verification and evaluating social media content from an Information Science (IS) and journalistic viewpoint. This chapter highlights the links to the basic tenets of librarianship—critical evaluation of information. Chapter 5 provides a synopsis of

\(^2\) News-story verification is another term that is used to describe this process (Martin, 2015).
possibilities on the horizon, such as automated journalism, and future roles for news library professionals in an age of digital social media. Finally, Chapter 6 looks ahead to the challenges and opportunities in our evolving mediascape, and implications for library service delivery.

The book will focus on the role of the news researcher in the print and broadcast media sector, given the author’s background as an embedded librarian in the media industry. However, many organizations—academic, government, and corporates, are utilizing social media tools to reach out and engage with their client base. The shift to tablets and smartphones for communication, news and entertainment has dramatically altered the library landscape. While librarians are often early adopters of technology, frequently our clients do not realize libraries provide access to authoritative online content. Thus, there is a need for more advocacy to ensure all stakeholders are aware of what library products and services are available to them, now and into the future.
CHAPTER 2

Information Professionals in the Newsroom

Libraries are very pertinent to their parent organizations and communities. Once considered the “gatekeepers” to knowledge, library staff in corporations and specialized settings have evolved from simply gathering information into the era of access,\(^3\) delivering leading-edge information services to their clients (Ferguson, 2007; O’Connor, 2007).

In 1997, the British Library funded a preliminary one-year investigation called “Journalism and the Internet” in order to examine the changing information environment in the newsroom due to the Internet. Subsequently, *New Library World* published a feature article called “Journalists, News Librarians and the Internet.” This study revealed that news librarians were much more positive about the internet than their journalist colleagues. At the same time, news librarians also had a heightened awareness of the problems, such as the authenticity or validity of retrieved information (Williams and Nicholas, 1997).

The authors concluded that while the internet was generally thought of as an end-user tool, it could potentially create novel and significant roles for news library professionals. It was predicted that librarians would work closer with journalists in the future, including possible involvement in more primary-sourced investigative work (Williams and Nicholas, 1997).

2.1 NEWSPAPER AND MEDIA LIBRARIES

The key objective of newspaper libraries is to support the reporting, editing, and illustrating of news stories by providing journalists with information and graphic materials, both in print and electronic forms. Most news libraries have collections of reference books,\(^4\) journals (print and electronic), and an archive of published stories either in a clippings file or in an online database. Also, libraries offer their clients access to ex-

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ternal sources of information, regularly supplying material in a timely fashion to meet publication deadlines (Edds, 2003).

Magazines also employ news librarians, and in the broadcast media industry there are librarians on staff to assist with news broadcasts. News librarians may be found in academic journalism libraries, and others work for vendors (Edds, 2003).

In the digital world, the nature of news has fundamentally changed. It has been reported that an industry wide crisis has triggered many news library closures (Paul and Hansen, 2002). In some cases, the closure of the library was due to the demise of the newspaper itself (Murray, 2014). Declining newspaper revenue, as well as the self-sufficiency of reporters are factors that have changed the nature of library work. This suggests the time is nigh for news library professionals to redefine their roles and reposition themselves within their organizations (Paul and Hansen, 2002; Matarazzo and Pearlstein, 2010). For instance, librarians need to be “champions for new technology,” communicate value, and become leaders of technology initiatives. Moreover, they need to become more closely aligned to the business and develop partnerships, instead of just providing a service (Paul and Hansen, 2002; O’Connor, 2007).

In order to achieve such outcomes, some media organizations have assigned news librarians or researchers to editorial teams, raising their visibility among the journalists they serve (Barreau, 2005). This “embedded” structure means that librarians play an active role in the editorial process, which in turn facilitates the establishment of closer, more collaborative relationships with their library clients (Barreau, 2005; Brown and Leith, 2007).

There are five conditions for the sustainment and growth of embedded librarianship in corporate and specialized organizational settings (Shumaker 2012: 104):

1. Establish relationships with key decision makers at all levels.

2. Ensure that the quality and value of the embedded librarian’s contribution continues to increase.

3. Lead the drive to perform necessary functions by the most cost-effective means available, whether in-house or by outside providers.

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5 For example, National Public Radio (NPR), CNN, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

6 For a list of news library staffing reductions from 2009 onward, see Quigley (2014).

7 Examples of self-sufficiency include the ability of reporters to do their own research via the internet, and being able to access the digitized newspaper archive without having to consult library staff.
4. Adopt evaluation practices that are consistent with the parent organization’s management culture.

5. In a financial crisis, seek to be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

The decision by Fairfax Media in Australia to decentralize their Research Library and embed information professionals within editorial teams created both challenges and opportunities for librarians. As Brown and Leith (2007: 546) finds, “Challenges include time management and prioritising in a highly deadline driven environment. Integration with the newsrooms and proximity to the journalists has led to a heightened sense of urgency with regards to the delivery of information … Opportunities have also emerged …. A higher level of analysis of data by librarians is being required and carried out as the level of collaboration with the editorial team increases.”

Indeed, the close proximity between editorial staff and librarians increased the level of trust to such a degree that the Research Library team received an increased number of in-depth and complex requests. On many occasions, their timelines, summaries, and people and company profiles were published, unchanged, in Fairfax Publications; with the Fairfax Research Library credited with print acknowledgements. This raised the profile of the library both within and outside the company (Brown and Leith, 2007).

The practice of embedded librarianship is active, engaged, and customized (Shumaker 2012). It is evident that news librarians and researchers are knowledge networkers, shifting their focus from supporting content creation to creating content. While news library professionals still perform traditional tasks—such as compiling background information for a news report, they may also be proactive, taking the lead on primary research, or contribute original story ideas.

News librarians often act as trainers for newsroom staff, both in library applications and external database sources (Taylor and Parrish, 2009; Matarazzo and Pearlstein, 2010). For example, the Fairfax Media Information Services Department implemented advanced research training courses for journalists, run by their librarians. Sessions were held in the boardroom, so this meant it was convenient and accessible for journalists to participate. Training included: Advanced FDC (Fairfax Digital Collections, the internal database), as well as external database sources. Another idea under investigation was to offer training outside the head office premises: the concept of “roving librarians” traveling to all Fairfax community mastheads that have FDC, in

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8 See Section 2.2: Case Study: Fairfax Media.
order to deliver training. This proposal would market and promote library services and facilities to journalists and staff at the same time.

To gain an understanding of the complexities of the role of the news librarian/news researcher, Matarazzo and Pearlstein (2010: 18) monitored the SLA News Division Newslib electronic discussion forum for a six-month period. Activities undertaken include:

- helping to find new revenue streams for their organizations;
- ascertaining how to use new technologies to enhance productivity and increase existing revenue sources:
  - digitizing text and photos (current and archival);
  - marketing network stock footage;
- responding to research inquiries from the public;
- using wikis as the backbone for an intranet;
- re-purposing blogs in print;
- utilizing social media sites as research resources;
- use of paraprofessional staff on the “help desk”; and
- investigating ways to reform copyright laws.

For library and information science professionals who aspire to work in the broadcast media sector, there are many areas of specialist knowledge required, extending from music to current affairs. You definitely need to be a news junkie and have excellent general knowledge. It is beneficial to be able to adapt what you know to unfamiliar territory. This means adapting your experience in traditional libraries to an audio-visual environment.

- Managing information: An understanding of digital libraries and content management, relevant metadata schemas, and production/client requirements is a prerequisite.

- Research: Apart from a sound understanding of content sources, it is crucial to have knowledge of copyright and restrictions in the broadcast environment. Much information and material retrieved for the media sector is necessary for re-use in production. This requires negotiation
skills to clear copyright and obtain the rights needed by the production (One Umbrella Team, 2011).

2.1.1 JOURNALISTS’ STUCK PLACES

While most journalists are happy doing interviews, many feel uncertain when it comes to delving into documents or databases (Houston, 2009). Yet documents and interviews can build on each other during the investigative process to produce a more in-depth news story, as displayed in Figure 2.1. A recent discussion on the SLA News Division Newslib listserv related to the places that journalists often get “stuck” when doing their research. In what ways do journalists typically have trouble finding, evaluating, and using information? Academic librarians are rethinking their approach, and are focusing on teaching to these “stuck” places.

![Figure 2.1: The investigative process: “Working from the outside in.” Based on Houston (2009), p. 3.](image)

Many reporters are intimidated by statistics, especially if they are the ones who say they hate math (and things like “this is why I went into journalism, so I wouldn’t...
have to deal with numbers."). They don't understand why the most recent data available from X government agency is from two years ago. Or that if they call the agency, they might get a better answer for their question than what is found on the website. For example, the contact might be able to sort the data a different way or have reports not yet posted.

They also don't know how to check with associations, non-profits, and academics etc., as alternative sources for statistics. There may be some inherent biases in data from an industry association, but that doesn't eliminate them as a source if you take those into account. And they may be the only ones doing the counting (News Researcher, Texas).

[News Researcher, Texas] raises a really good point about the value of seeking out alternative sources for statistics. And not just relying on a website but calling and asking for a data expert or a librarian. This need for alternative/diversity can also be extended to the sources used by reporters for interviewing. For example, here in Ohio, it's very easy to rely on Ohio State University experts for comment on stories. It's important that we reach out to get perspective from experts at other colleges and universities in the area, too.

I don't know if undergrads know the value of searching newspapers on microfilm and seeing the printed news coverage of a date in the past. With the Internet, you really don't get the sense of if a story is front page worthy, how big the headline was, and how it was played on the page. Microfilm gives a lot of good context. For example, what was the nation thinking about the day before 9/11? (Archive and Collections Manager, Ohio).

I agree, we need to encourage reporters to go off the grid. Too often I find errors or stories that could have been better if the reporter had asked if we had a file (Online Producer/News Researcher, Georgia).

2.2 CASE STUDY: FAIRFAX MEDIA

For several decades the Fairfax Research Library provided a traditional service to staff, incorporating a central Information Desk. In response to calls to reduce the library footprint to accommodate 70 extra masthead staff, the Information Services Department decided to turn the situation into a positive, re-thinking how library services were delivered in line with international best practice. Hence, the Research Library