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## Drowning in Bad Information

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# Help me! I'm Drowning in Bad Information

by Tony Leisner (Dawsons)

A few years ago I met the executive director of the American Association of University

Women and had a spirited discussion of the report her association authored dealing with gender bias in American schools. When, just recently, I read a book review in a publication that cited some data from the study, it caught my attention. I didn't recall that the study reached the conclusions the reviewer made reference to and wanted to go back and check it out for accuracy. My significant other is always reminding me to call the library for questions like this one so I, for once, listened to her and called the local library. Since the executive director of the AAUW lived in the same town as I and the report had achieved widespread news coverage, I felt sure that this was a no brainer. How wrong I was. The library did not have the report and the librarian didn't know where to get a copy. He did tell me that there were several articles related to the report but that the report itself would most likely be in a pamphlet file somewhere in the system. This from a library with over \$40 per annum/per capita support but with little access to anything but print. I was not interested in more articles since my original concern involved a bad interpretation of the report. I wanted the real thing.

A repeat of this occurred just this week when the Justice Department released its study of violence in families. I read two articles about the report and both reached different conclusions about the significance of the findings and both articles cited different statistical data. One stated "nearly two thirds" and the other said 62% which isn't nearly two thirds but is closer to 60%. This would have left the other number almost 40% which is a far cry from the implied one third in the first quote. What is wrong here is that journalists' interpretations are being construed as factual. News articles which reference and then add the bias of the reporter find their way into print and then, for the print-only oriented library, can become facts themselves. How important is this?

It is the core issue of librarianship and it is the heart of the role of the library that is at stake here. Since I am not just print reliant I went online for the answers I needed. The article in the publication had misstated the conclusions of the AAUW study which completely altered the quality of the book review to which it was being applied. A librarian writing in a library publication about a book that other librarians will be selecting and the facts are wrong. The outcome of all of this will be costly for lots of people. True, I paid extra charges to the databases that unveiled my answers and I also paid by using my time. In fact, I actually paid twice because I still had to pay for the public library even though they couldn't help me. Would I have paid the library instead for the added cost of getting me the answers? I don't know because they have never asked me.

Opinions aren't facts!

Before you write/e-mail/flame me, let me tell you that many librarians tell me this could easily be the case in their library. That they have either limited or no access to the fee databases or that they lack the in-house search skills to use them properly. Others tell me that while they have the access, the original source documents were not published online or are not in databases. Perhaps because of copyright issues, lack of awareness of the value of electronic publishing, lack of capability or just a focus on the report itself and no concern for dissemination, only the articles and opinions are available. The opinions, like someone on a talk show who makes a hair-brained inaccurate statement, begin to take on a life of their own and get quoted to the point where the trail is so muddy that it can't be traced.

Society has always been in conflict over the issue of learning the facts versus hearing what we want to hear even if deep down we know it conflicts. True information literacy and the ability of people to make informed decisions which will have positive outcomes has always depended on their access to accurate information upon which they will then draw their own conclusions. Facts in print-only form cannot always be taken as factual. Last month, the giant Fidelity Mutual funds had a computer malfunction and were unable to report their ac-

tual closing prices for a day. Someone in the company decided to just repeat the closing prices of the previous day in order to avoid admitting to the problem. Obviously those prices in the newspaper were wrong, factually incorrect. In reality they were a complete fabrication with no relationship to the truth. Yet, for thousands of libraries that rely only on print, these numbers will be taken as factual because they are the quotes in the newspaper for that day. There is no opportunity to alter these "quotes." The databases will have either corrected the numbers or so noted in the inquiry field for that day's data that the numbers aren't accurate. The information literate will have the truth and the illiterate will have a lie. In your own library, if you are print reliant only, has anyone gone back to the day in question and added a cautionary note to the financial section of that fateful Friday's newspaper?

## The Role of Acquisitions

More and more it will be a team effort to insure that the best sources of information are available and acquisitions librarians will need to heighten their awareness of all the options available. Decisions will have to be made about the quality and the quantity of information and how much more is the correct information worth? It may mean leaving the systems of the past and even the vendors you have done business with for decades. A change in thinking from print to electronic requires an acceptance that information will be fluid and not locked in type. Access to the best and most accurate is far more valuable than possession of outdated or inaccurate information. You render a greater service to the customer when you tell her that you don't have what she wants than when you give her the wrong information.

Each time librarians allow opinions to be accepted as facts or inaccurate information to remain unchallenged, whether or not they agree with it, they have contributed to the increase in information illiteracy. The reliance on any single format for information sources will deprive a library of the opportunity to be a true value-added resource which helps people to seek out the truth. A noble calling indeed. ☞