

I See Lies in Your Future: What Librarians Can Learn from Fortunetellers about Fake News

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A woman, dressed in a gauzy cloak covered with embroidered stars, sits in an incense-choked room among crystals and tapestries. She invites you to take a seat, then gently asks for your palm. “Are you left or right handed?” she asks, and explains that each hand reveals different paths. She tells you of things she could have never known without some second sense – your painful adolescence, your lifelong conflicts with your parents, your desire for a freer, less conventional life, the person you loved in your twenties that didn’t work out. And then she tells you that, if you are careful, you have the chance to live a good, long life. At the end of your meeting with her, you tip her generously, confident that her gift for second sight has stood you well.

Or has it?

Fortune tellers are entertainers, plain and simple. While many of them claim that they take their cues from the 19th century mystic [Cheiro](#) (especially palm readers and numerologists) or from ancient Greek, Egyptian or Roman schools of thought, the truth is that fortune telling leans on a few basic psychological principles. Surprisingly, fake news stories also use these principles to spread their false claims. Learning about these principles can help librarians become better at identifying fake stories and teaching others how to identify them as well.

The first of these principles is a sense of intimacy, a shared knowledge that excludes others. Fake news tends to spread because it reaffirms people’s previously existing beliefs, a psychological factor known as [confirmation bias](#). Confirmation bias can also lead people to join groups that are based on these beliefs, and explicitly exclude people who don’t hold them – see any anti-vaccination Facebook group for a clear example. Fortune tellers take a slightly different angle with confirmation bias. They tend to reinforce positive characteristics that most people admire, such as dependability, friendship, intelligence or positivity. By confirming the best perceived traits of a person, the fortune teller gains trust and seems more believable.

Another tool that both fake news and fortune tellers use is a logical fallacy known as “[appeal to authority](#).” Appeal to authority involves claiming that something is true because either lots of people believe it or because someone famous (but unqualified) said so. A fortune teller may claim that astrology is real because people have studied and used astrology for thousands of years, including kings, scientists and famous authors. Singer Ariana Grande, who has sold millions of records, may claim that peanut butter makes terrific shampoo. However, that doesn’t make astrology factually accurate or peanut butter good hair care.

Neither millions of people or Ariana Grande offer enough expertise to provide anything more than a simple endorsement for their beliefs. Appeals to authority are frequently used by politicians, advertisements and social influencers in order to gain support for their ideas or products while obscuring a lack of proof or scientific support for their statements. They are also used in fake news stories (either with real or fake quotes) to provide a veneer of truth to the story's contents: If so-and-so said it, it must be true.

Both fake news stories and fortune tellers rely on one more trick to get people to trust them. The Forer Effect, also known as the Barnum Effect, uses personality characteristics that are true of many people and highlights them as a means of gaining trust. For example, a fake news story might claim that only "sheeple" won't believe the claims in the story, or yell loudly "wake up, people!" Combined with confirmation bias, the Forer Effect might encourage a fake news consumer to trust the article by convincing the fake news consumer that only a few have "true knowledge", and that everyone else is lying. A fortune teller may take a more traditional approach, using classic "Barnum statements" such as "You have a great need for people to like and accept you" or "You pride yourself as an independent thinker." Barnum statements, named after circus legend P.T. Barnum, are so general as to apply to everyone, and can be used by a number of different fortune telling formats, from oneiromancy (dream divination) to tasseography (reading tea leaves) to cartomancy (tarot cards.) Both fortune telling and fake news bank on a sense of exclusivity to keep their audiences and to maintain faith in their work.

What can a fake news fighter do in the face of these kinds of deceptions? First, never underestimate the power of the individual reference appointment. Most people enjoy feeling special or appreciated, and fake news rewards consumers with a sense of elevated intelligence ("only idiots trust mainstream news"). Fortune tellers establish trust quickly through personal connection – the touch of a hand, the implied sense of deep knowledge. One trick that librarians might try is emphasizing the specialness of a reference appointment – an exclusive opportunity to work, one-on-one, with a librarian. By creating a trusted bond over a shared subject, a patron may feel more able to identify fake news in the future – and more willing to thank the librarian who taught them. One-on-one contact, while time consuming, may pay dividends as patrons share their knowledge in a similar, intimate fashion with friends and colleagues.

Second, librarians should be willing to serve as the authority that others seek. Hosting workshops on fake news topics can reinforce the library's position as a place of knowledge and truth. With librarians demonstrating and discussing everything from news cycles to social media to, yes, confirmation bias, appeals to authority and the Forer Effect, they can prove their expertise and build the information literacy of their communities. They become, as CR McClain, executive director of LUMCON explains, "nerds of trust" who can be relied upon for accurate information.

Third, and possibly hardest, is to leverage all the tools available to promote information literacy. Does your community have a local radio station? Volunteer to do a weekly pre-recorded PSA highlighting aspects of fake news and information literacy. Do you have a

strong partnership with a local nonprofit? Expand your footprint to include workshops in their areas as well. Are you friendly with the local Chamber of Commerce? They would benefit from your skills as well. Every partnership, every social media account, every class, every interaction with the community is an opportunity to boost your fake news fighting ability.

While fake news is definitely in everyone's future, that doesn't mean you shouldn't take every opportunity to make it part of the past. If you lay down the right cards, a clear path to information literacy can be found. You don't need to read the tea leaves to see that fake news is built on a bag of tricks designed to fool even intelligent people into trusting its claims. With logic, connectivity and communication, fake news can fall the way of a faded fate line into the dustbin of history.

KT Lowe, MSI 2011 is a graduate of the University of Michigan and has experience in correctional librarianship. She developed the [Fake News LibGuide](#) in November 2016, the first LibGuide available that addressed fake news and provided both tools and resources to librarians, teachers and students. She also delivers a weekly mini-podcast for WECI Radio on fake news (Sunday, 7-8 PM as part of the Leave it to Cleaver show). Her interest in fortune telling began in childhood, preferring palmistry over most other fortune telling methods.