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# Combat and sacrifice: the culture of information crisis in teaching librarianship

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** This paper extends recent research into the use of *information crisis* terminology within information studies to trace how the concept functions and is used within professional teaching librarian practice.

**Method.** Employing critical discourse analysis, the paper examines the conference proceedings from ten teaching librarian conferences (2014–2024), a database of information literacy lesson plans and the introductory chapters of selected practitioner-oriented handbooks to identify conventions of information crisis language within teaching librarianship.

**Results.** Findings suggest that teaching librarians' discourse of information crisis is shaped through considerations of time and affect, which position educational work as both urgent and intense.

**Conclusion(s).** Concern that the use of evocative images and metaphors obscures teaching librarian labour as well as a reliance on a growing industry of information crisis solutions suggests the need for continued critical interrogation of the use of this term within librarianship.

## Introduction

The term *information crisis* evokes the rampant circulation of (and access to) the ‘*wrong type of information*,’ be that *misinformation* and/or *fake news* (Hicks and Noone, 2023, p. 604). The use of a crisis framing, which marks a particular time as unprecedented or urgent, has been critiqued for presuming that contemporary information conditions are an exception to otherwise stable and uncontested knowledge systems (Kuo and Marwick, 2021); recent analysis of information studies literature, for example, demonstrates that the language of an ‘*information crisis* ignores the ‘*hegemonic orderings of race, gender, rationalism and class*’ (Hicks and Noone, 2023, p. 606) that have long been encoded in information systems (Ibekwe, 2023) and library practices (Honma, 2005). In contrast, librarians and information professionals have responded to the information crisis diagnosis with a number of fixes, often in the form of information literacy education. However, given the confounded symptoms of this crisis, such suggested remedies give cause for concern about both the work that teaching librarians take on and the impact of this language on the culture of library practice. We apply Stuart Hall’s (1980) understanding of culture as ‘*the lens*’ through which everyday phenomena are experienced and interpreted. To this end, we ask: how does the language of information crisis operate in teaching librarian practice and what does this mean for librarianship? This question, which is explored through an analysis of teaching librarian resources, is important given the key role that discourse plays in shaping professional practice (cf. Hicks and Lloyd, 2021).

## The work of teaching librarians

The work of teaching librarians remains surprisingly under-explored within the literature; while research has considered how librarians experience teaching roles (Julien and Genius, 2011) and a teaching identity (Wheeler and McKinney, 2015), less attention has been paid to how this work happens, despite the belief that librarianship should be evidence based (Pilerot and Lindberg, 2018). An exception is found in Nicholson and colleagues, who critically interrogate the shape of information literacy instruction through a lens of time (Nicholson, 2016) and labour (Mirza et al., 2023). Highlighting that information literacy instruction is shaped by a neoliberal temporal order (Nicholson, 2016), this literature also draws on Hicks and Lloyd (2021), who note the absence of librarians from professional documentation, to highlight the devaluing of care as well as other forms of work within instructional librarianship (Mirza et al., 2023). Yet, critical research into what and how librarians teach remains limited despite the growth in practitioner literature. This gap is seen most clearly in relation to misinformation, where literature had tended to be restricted to practical guidance such as ‘*do your research*’ and ‘*check your sources*’ (although see Sullivan, 2019a, 2019b for a useful critical take). Willenborg and Detmering (2025, n.p.) provide an interesting counterpoint in their study of teaching in the ‘*misinformation age*’. However, while they note feelings of ‘*angst*,’ as librarians balance a perceived ‘*professional obligation*’ to teach on the topic with a lack of time and expertise, the focus of the paper remains centred on the material conditions of instruction librarianship rather than the culture that shapes these tensions.

## Methods: analysing professional literature

Assessing language’s role in constructing cultures (Baker and Galasiński, 2001; Hall, 1980) we carried out a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of library practitioner teaching resources to identify how the information crisis is constructed in professional practice. Resources included the conference proceedings from ten international library practitioner conferences (2014–2024), a database of information literacy lesson plans and the introductory chapters of selected books in print (see Appendix 1), all of which foreground teaching knowledge exchange. We initially searched these texts for references to information crisis but, given that recent years have associated the information crisis with access to ‘*the wrong type of information*’ (Hicks and Noone, 2023, p. 604), we later expanded the search to include related terms, such as fake news and misinformation. Coding was based on a close reading of each text and was carried out independently by each

researcher. We then came together to discuss the emerging analysis and the overarching discourses that we noticed within professional literature. Limitations of the study include the exclusion of journal articles and other forms of empirical practitioner work from the data set. We also acknowledge the need to explore school, public and health library conference proceedings to extend this research.

## Findings: the information crisis within teaching librarianship

One of the most noticeable ways in which the information crisis shapes practitioner work is through the evocation of time and speed. Accelerated information environments, for example, are used to highlight the urgency of the crisis, with authors warning of '24hr news cycles' that value 'first mover advantage' and social media algorithms that 'privilege viral content' (Acosta, 2017, n.p.) alongside concerns that the accuracy of information is 'sacrificed' (Acosta, 2017, n.p.) for the sake of the speed of dissemination (Ünal et al., 2021, p. 80). References to current events, including US presidential elections (Appedu and Kaye Hensley, 2021, p. 97) and protest movements (Maury and Gatty, 2021, p. 66), further establish the information crisis as immediate, while warnings that misinformation 'floats around online' (Cooke, 2018, p. 2) suggest that it is also long-lasting. The temporal is often accompanied by spatial considerations, with the labelling of information as 'rampant' (Mooney, 2018, p. 85), 'spread[ing] throughout the internet' (Long and Hicks, 2019, p. 128) and crowding out reputable journalism (Center for News Literacy, n.d.) further fixing the crisis as both invasive and inescapable. In contrast, people are positioned as temporally and spatially limited, or narrow-minded (Frith and Webb, 2021, p. 26), trapped by their own biases (Acosta, 2017), and as having a short attention span (Phillips and Burkholder, 2022, n.p.). These labels, which introduce a deficit perspective, lay the groundwork for librarian interventions.

In contrast, solutions for the crisis often directly oppose these spatiotemporal framings with references to librarians and library interventions more typically emphasising leisurely deliberation. Interestingly, this was not always the case with earlier literature framing the information crisis as fixed through the application of 'low effort' (Valant, 2018, n.p.) or timesaving (He et al., 2019, p. 51) fact-checking strategies (Oehrli, 2018, n.p.) and acronyms (Kiczenski, 2020, n.p.). As literature developed, however, librarian interventions became noticeably slower, with learners being encouraged to 'pause' (Abdeljawad, 2022, p. 133), 'stop' (Kiczenski, 2020, n.p.) and 'reflect' (Phillips and Burkholder, 2022, n.p.) on the impact that information has upon them. Specific librarian-recommended techniques for managing the effects of the information crisis also became lengthier, with learners encouraged to 'thoroughly investigate' (Frith and Webb, 2021, p. 26) a complex news story, including through checking library databases (Oehrli, 2018, n.p.), seeking out 'as much information externally as you can find,' including from websites, articles and opposing perspectives (Kiczenski, 2020, n.p.) or working through lists of questions to investigate sources (Kiczenski, 2020, n.p.). Librarians also draw on time to justify their claim to the information crisis space in the shape of a longstanding engagement with information evaluation education (He et al., 2019, p. 49; Maury and Gatty, 2021, p.66).

The temporalities of information crisis subsequently translate into intensified affective demands in which library practitioners must calibrate to the intensities of battle. Practitioners frame the work of addressing fake news and misinformation through metaphors of conflict, with information environments broadly construed as under threat or unsafe. For example, Sanches et al. (2024, p. 151) issue a call to arms to those 'most committed to combating' what they term as a 'catastrophic informational scenario,' while further highlighting the need to 'protect ... the most vulnerable' in 'the disinformation fight.' Similarly, the Social Sciences Libraries Section of IFLA (2022) brings together 'library professionals who are fighting fake information in and around their communities,' a theme that is echoed in Revez and Corujo (2021), who place librarians 'on the front line against fake news' and Ameen and Naeem (2020, p.17), who position fake news as a 'threat to peace' as well as democracy. The establishment of librarians as a 'shield' (Rajic, 2022) between fake information and

library patrons provides further evidence of the affective dimensions of librarianship when information crisis serves as a proxy for combat. Indeed, these are a small sample of instances where the work of librarianship is linked to emotional and physical confrontation. At the same time, the librarian is tasked with the additional affective work of staying positive during such battle, with reflections of *'we chose to embrace the positivity'* of crisis and *'share the success'* (IFLA, 2022). Indeed, Nick Poole (2024), former Chief Executive of CILIP, issued a rallying call for librarians to *'come together'* in the *'war on truth'* rather than to *'retreat'* in the face of conflict. The corollary of the pep rally alongside the rigours of combat reads as an exercise in keeping up morale through rituals of preparedness and recognition.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2004) analysis of emotion and affect as cultural practices, we see how the prescribed responses to crisis symptoms – combat, resilience, resolve – presume that crisis is a collective experience that librarians are already primed and ready to address. Metaphors of defensive battle, which further nod to how vocational awe positions librarianship as tied to *'struggle, sacrifice, and obedience,'* (Ettarh, 2018, n.p.), additionally maintain the conceit that information environments were previously both egalitarian (see Honma, 2005) and stable (Hicks and Noone, 2023). In effect, the intensity expected of librarian responses escalate crisis rather than addressing the historical contingencies of information systems, including through harm reduction or mutual aid (Spade, 2020). Instead, these registers position teaching librarianship within what Ellcessor (2019) terms an *'infrastructure of feeling'* where a phenomenon becomes defined by its responses rather than the substance of the problem itself.

## Discussion and conclusion

Asking questions about how the culture of information crisis plays out within teaching librarianship may seem unwarranted, or a betrayal of the pep rally spirit. Yet, the information crisis discourse not only takes contested knowledge structures for granted but also obscures the additional work demanded to maintain a crisis prognosis. Positioning information crisis as both urgent and unprecedented redirects librarian labour towards fast and actionable solutions, which favours specific analytical technologies and techniques (Lancaster and Rhodes, 2023, p. 4), and adds to teaching work by requiring the development of specific heuristics. The scale of threats creates additional resource implications by sapping attention from other educational initiatives. At the same time, the slow solutions proposed by librarians mask other forms of labour, including the care needed to re-centre visibility foreclosed by speed (Lancaster and Rhodes, 2023, p. 4) as well as exploitative working arrangements. The positioning of *'sped-up people'* (Sharma, 2013, p. 126) as irresponsible, which reproduces the need for rationalistic enforcement, further problematically shapes work by reasserting the *'power of the institutional space'* (Sharma, 2013, p. 134).

To meet the demands of the information crisis culture, the teaching librarian literature points to private sector training programmes, software and apps as possible tactics to *'fight against fake news and misinformation'* (Strohecker, 2019). The referenced tools include Checkology, an e-learning platform sponsored by BigTech partners, and the Centre for News Literacy, which offers a Coursera course on *Making sense of the news*. These programmes and softwares broker an information expertise through a one-size-fits-all approach to information literacy, operating as proxy labour for information practitioners. Posing as solutions, tools such as Checkology evidence a commodification of information crisis within institutionalised critical librarianship (Seale, 2016). Moreover, software-driven techniques of information sorting, often positivist and algorithmic (Benjamin, 2019), fail to account for the complexity of information work and downplay consideration for the longstanding issues of hegemonic authority and truth within information environments (Kuo and Marwick, 2021). In effect, tertiary industries such as these simultaneously profit from and maintain a culture of crisis (Klein, 2007; Ellcessor, 2024).

The discourse of information crisis is not benign: it shapes a culture of practice. This short paper provides a framework to understand how this language operates in and is modelled through the

professional literature. Future research will include interviews with information professionals about their experiences. As a practice-focussed discipline, it is essential to interrogate what is taken for granted in these damaging discourses, given that expectations of working faster and with more force have the potential to reconfigure the shape of professional practice.

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## Appendix 1: Texts Analysed

- Books
  - Burkhardt, J. M. (2017). *Combating fake news in the digital age*. American Library Association.
  - Cooke, N. A. (2018). *Fake news and alternative facts: information literacy in a post-truth era*. American Library Association.
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  - Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) (UK)
  - International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (International)
  - Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (US)
  - Information Literacy
  - Critical Librarianship and Pedagogy Symposium (CLAPS) (US)
  - European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL) (Europe)
  - International Conference on Information Literacy (ICIL) (International)
  - Librarians' Information Literacy Conference (LILAC) (UK)
  - Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) (US)
  - Workshop in Library Use (WILU) (Canada)
- Research Assignments
  - Community of Online Research Assignments (CORA)