Post Truth thoughts

An introduction for Trust and Belief. Workshop session SLA Weekend Course, Glasgow 2018.

Insights prompted by reading the following
D'Ancona. Matthew. 2017. *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back.* Ebury Press. 978 1785036873

No one thing is attributable or may be identified as a cause of the rise of post-truth. There is not one single identifiable cause. Donald Trump is a consequence of the age and not a cause. D'Ancona whose book is peppered with detailed research references states that if and when Trump leaves the White House it will not signal the end of the post-truth era.   It is incorrect to see it as a battle between liberals and conservatives (using those terms in the widest sense). It is two ways of perceiving the world.   What it means is 'that honesty and accuracy are no longer assigned the highest priority in political exchange'.

So, for example Donald Trump sees the electorate as an audience and he offered the majority white voters a series of enemies against which they could unite. There are parallels with the 2016 referendum and the Brexit debate. Brexiteers managed to promote emotional resonance. Arron Banks is quoted as saying 'you have to connect to people emotionally'. You might argue that simple slogans such as 'take back control' appealed to a selection of the electorate in all sorts of ways and from that a cobweb of spurious claims were made.

It is not so much about truth or lies but about trust. Michael Gove was able to say 'people have had enough of experts' and despite later claiming that this quotation has been taken out of context it is a fact that it is common today for experts to be vilified rather than being respected. Trust is an essential human survival mechanism so before we leave this we might ponder how we have come to this.

D'Ancona suggests we should at least go back to the 2008 crash. Financial institutions which had the trust of ordinary men and women were no longer sustainable and the knock on

effect was disastrous for 'ordinary families'. There was a lack of faith in formerly trusted institutions and globalisation; the Westminster expenses scandal led to mistrust of politicians. Revelations about cover-ups of misconduct in hallowed institutions such as the BBC and the hacking scandal of the News of the World resulted in the lack of credibility in the media – arguably at a time when a 'trustworthy' media was most needed.

All this occurred as the development of social media and use of the Web in general was inexorably creeping along. The growth of Web 2.0 increased the ability to group with like-minded contributors. If we regularly correspond with our friends and family through social media then we put trust in their opinions and sources they may quote. Despite the altruistic dreams of Sir Tim Berners-Lee and other early adopters the Web became a tool to be used to vilify, berate and belittle. Anonymity reduces accountability so discussions often sink to little more than a playground slanging match. Users settle complacently into echo chambers which confirm their own opinions. Add on the technical wizardry of algorithms and many users never need to move from their comfort zone and encounter reasoned discussions. Although they are frequently blamed, algorithms are meant to give us what we like. (D'Ancona) They are not a design flaw.

You might infer this offers a gloomy picture but I would like to offer some tools to help you to improve the gullibility of your students (and possibly of colleagues too). Some are referenced in the PowerPoint presentation. Two major guides have been published recently which offer you both a rationale as to why you should be helping your students in this way. The Information Literacy Group of CILIP has updated and re-issued its definition of Information literacy and this has a direct reference to fake news "…an ability to display critical judgement about multiple information sources, particularly online, is crucial".

There are resources on the ILG website including the TeenTech sheets which may be new to some delegates. There are useful articles on student perceptions of their abilities in detecting false information. A very recent one was undertaken by Geoff Walton and is well worth a read. Finally, I would suggest the report on Fake News and Critical Literacy from the National Literacy Trust is a must – even though explicit mention of school librarians is somewhat limited. However, do look at the downloadable resources as they will help you to form ideas for sessions applicable to your own organisation.

References appear on a separate sheet. For quick reference specific sources are

ttps://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/fake-news-and-critical-literacy-final-report/

https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/fake-news-and-critical-literacy/

http://www.teentech.com/teentech-awards/supporting-materials/

Walton, Geoff, Pickard, Alison J. Dodd, Lara. 2018. Information discernment, mis-information and pro-active scepticism. Journal of Librarianship and Information Science https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0961000618769980