# Impact and Management of Mis/Disinformation in University Libraries in Australia

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ALIA Research Grant Snapshot Report

## Introduction

This snapshot report outlines key findings and recommendations from a research project conducted on the impact and management of mis/disinformation in university libraries in Australia. The full results, literature review, research approach and methods can be found in an article 'The Impact and Management of Mis/Disinformation at University Libraries in Australia' in the *Journal of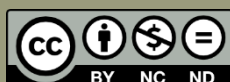 the Australian Library and Information Association* [doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2023.2235646](doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2023.2235646). A toolkit of resources to support academic libraries is also included, some of which were provided by interviewees, is provided in both reports.

*Key Findings:*

- Library staff believe they have a role in teaching skills such as critical thinking and evaluation, advocating in this space and maintaining credible, balanced and inclusive collections.

- Library staff face a number of barriers to being able to effectively manage mis/disinformation including the constantly evolving ways that mis/disinformation spreads, lack of time to investigate accuracy of content or authority in collections, time and resources to learn more about the topic, and lack of strategic priority for this topic in universities.

- Universities libraries don't have collection development/management guidelines or policies in this space and staff deal with complaints on an ad hoc basis.

- The practice of managing acquisitions through large subscriptions means there is less need for subject expertise and a lack of time and resources to assess collection content.

- The library's role is not to censor information, and there is a need to maintain historical content, but with warnings and context around controversial or misinformation content.

- Many university libraries are prioritising or planning policies and initiatives related to Indigenous collections and decolonising collections.

- Library staff would like support from national associations such as ALIA/CAUL through guidelines, teaching exemplars, toolkits, advocacy, training, discussions, and communities of practice.

## Results

Library professionals working in university libraries were invited to participate in a survey through multiple communications including newsletters and email lists. The Qualtrics survey gathered information from library staff about their experiences with mis/disinformation. The survey and interview questions were formulated after consultation with another researcher who was undertaking similar research in public libraries. A total of 88 library staff filled out the survey. Seventeen interviews were also conducted with library services, scholarly communication and collections managers across Australian universities. 61% were employed as librarians and 71% said they maintain currency on the topic through readings, conferences, workshops and social media.

*Key topics*

The two key topics around mis/disinformation that staff felt were most important to university libraries were media/information literacy and students obtaining information from social media. Other key topics mentioned by survey respondents were fake and misleading political discourse, not verifying information on social media, critical literacy and teaching students how to recognise and evaluate reliable sources of information.

| | Highest ranked topics of concern |
|---|---|
| 1. | Media/information literacy |
| 2. | Students obtaining information from social media |
| 3. | Advocating for use of quality and accurate information |
| 4. | The use in curriculum of non-academic or non-verified sources of information |
| 5. | Inaccurate or outdated information in collections. |

Table 1: Top 5 key topics.

*Current practice and skills related to mis/disinformation*

The most common practice related to mis/disinformation in university libraries is teaching about evaluating quality information followed by providing a library guide on the topic. Based on the survey responses there are limited campaigns around mis/disinformation in Australian university libraries and little to no mis/disinformation collection development policies or procedures. Other resources mentioned included a Canvas learning module, ensuring course readings are current and including collection items that discuss evaluating dis/misinformation.

Respondents ranked the most important skills needed to combat mis/disinformation. Critical thinking and evaluating information were seen as the most important skills with understanding digital manipulation of images, videos being considered the least important skill.

| | Skills needed to combat mis/disinformation |
|---|---|
| 1. | Critical thinking |
| 2. | Evaluating information |
| 3. | Understanding bias (both self and information) |
| 4. | Reading critically |
| 5. | Knowing how to find facts |
| 6. | Differentiating between fact and opinion |
| 7. | Knowing how to establish authority |
| 8. | Recognising authority/verification in social media |
| 9. | Understanding digital manipulation of images, videos etc |

Table 2: Skills to combat mis/disinformation

*Role of libraries*

Library staff recognise many roles they play in combating or managing mis/disinformation including:

- Advocacy
- Expertise

- Teaching
- Providing resources

- Education on the scholarly process

Both respondents of the survey and interviews felt that the role of library staff in mis/disinformation is to advocate in this space and show the libraries' expertise on this topic.

> *"An active role of advocacy, communication, research. Countering mis/disinformation is core to our work as educators about information phenomena, is critically important within the research ecosystem, and is directly relevant to our stewardship of collections."*

Library staff and managers also felt that the libraries' role is providing services in this space including teaching skills around critical thinking, information literacy and evaluation.

> *"Promoting critical thinking and teaching/developing resources to develop student skills in information evaluation/media literacy."*

Respondents felt that it is the role of libraries to ensure users are educated on the scholarly process including having conversations around critically evaluating academic information, the peer review process, bias in academic content as well as ensuring our collections are credible and authentic.

> *"I think we've seen over the last few years that there's been a huge focus on the issue of fake news and particularly on trying to establish the credibility of information that is published openly on the Internet or through the media. I think for libraries, there should be a greater focus on imparting the process of science, the way of evaluating scholarly information and not being overly reliant on this idea of a peer review process as being the be all and end all."*

### *Barriers in dealing with mis/disinformation*

The number one barrier survey respondents felt university libraries face was the constantly evolving ways that mis/disinformation is spread and lack of time to investigate accuracy of content or authority of authors in the collection, as shown in table 3. Managers responded slightly differently on the most significant barriers, with the highest barriers being concerns around academics not valuing classes or information or having the resources or tools to disseminate information (table 4).

| | Barriers dealing with mis/disinformation |
|---|---|
| 1. | Constantly evolving ways that mis/disinformation is spread |
| 2. | Lack of time to investigate accuracy of content or authority of authors in the collection |
| 3. | Academics not valuing classes or information on media, information or digital literacy |
| 4. | Having the resources or tools to disseminate information about mis/disinformation to students and academics |
| 5. | Lack of training or professional development on the topic |

Table 3: Top barriers to dealing with mis/disinformation

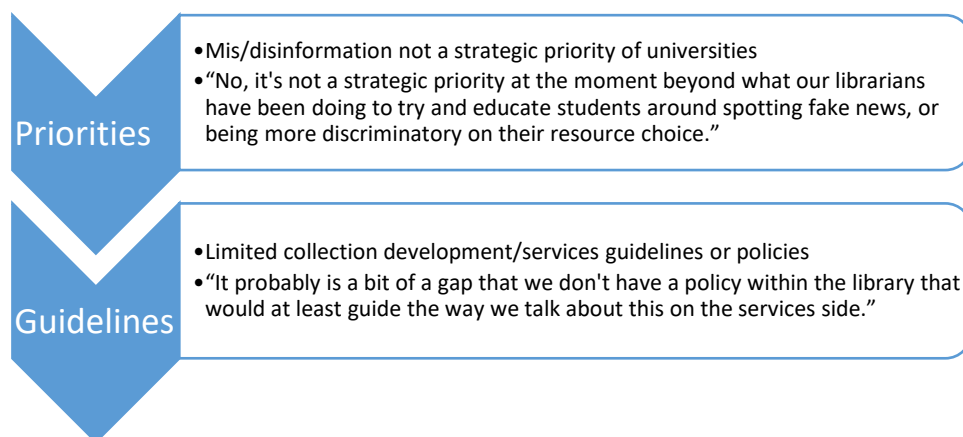| Top concerns for managers | |
|---|---|
| Academics not valuing or prioritising classes and teaching barriers | *"On the service side one of the things is definitely a lack of interest in the topic by our clients. But because I do think that a lot of us are in a position where we don't have endless resources, we need to focus our efforts in areas where we can demonstrate the impact that we're having."* |
| Assessing collections | *"I think resourcing, like it's actually quite resource intensive to continually assess your collections."* |

| Complexity of the issue | *"I think that that's probably the biggest barrier for us is just what's the rest of the world doing and what else are people exposed to within their non university life."* |
|---|---|
| Lack of time to keep up to date and upskill. Lack of time /resources for staff training /resources or tools to disseminate information | *"I think probably just time and being able to keep ahead or keep up with what's happening in this space."* |

Table 4: Barriers for managers

### *Guidelines and complaints*

When asked how they currently manage mis/disinformation in collections, the majority of respondents in the survey stated that they either do not have a collection development/management process or policy related to mis/disinformation, or deal with it on an ad hoc basis. Interviews revealed that most university libraries do not have any policies/guidelines in this space beyond general collection development policies and that mis/disinformation is mostly not a strategic focus for universities.

Only around 1% of respondents in the survey reported they had had a complaint or incident related to mis/disinformation and managers also reported low numbers of complaints. If complaints are received, they are mostly dealt with ad hoc and there are no overarching guidelines from their university or at a national level, so libraries have to make decisions case by case. Libraries often use collection policies to support decisions, including the importance of not censoring items. Libraries are more likely to limit access or provide a warning than remove from the collection, although on occasion a discredited book or journal article has been removed from the collection.

**Priorities**
- Mis/disinformation not a strategic priority of universities
- "No, it's not a strategic priority at the moment beyond what our librarians have been doing to try and educate students around spotting fake news, or being more discriminatory on their resource choice."

**Guidelines**
- Limited collection development/services guidelines or policies
- "It probably is a bit of a gap that we don't have a policy within the library that would at least guide the way we talk about this on the services side."

### *Censorship*

A strong theme in the interviews was around censorship and how censorship and mis/disinformation can cause conflicting views on the role libraries play in removing or highlighting instances of mis/disinformation. Questions arose during the interviews around whether removing historical inaccurate information constitutes censorship and whether libraries need to maintain neutrality.

> *"You don't really want to get in the place of being the censor. Because if you start down that, that's a very slippery slope. In terms of collection decisions, some of the things that we've tried*

*to do is have some guidelines that speak to the teaching and learning, and the research, so we collect in those areas."*

Most managers believed that it is not the library's role to censor materials, but it is useful to provide warnings on records indicating that a resource might no longer be accurate, but still important as part of a historical context.

*"I think generally speaking libraries don't go in for censorship and I think we have the tools available to us if we choose to use them to maybe note the record if it's a controversial book, for example. But it's useful for the study of the history of a particular subject, even if what it contains is no longer relevant."*

### Indigenous collections

A major finding from the interviews was that university libraries are prioritising or planning policies and initiatives related to Indigenous collections and 'decolonising' collections.

*"We appointed a Cultural Advisor who developed a series of cultural protocols for the library and have engaged with community around these kinds of issues. And we're in the process now of operationalising those protocols. Flagging materials that use kind of insensitive language, there's some practical things that we're working through."*

*"We're currently working on an Indigenous Knowledges Initiative, which is partially about being able to better identify Indigenous authored material from our collections, we're setting up facets and things like that."*

### Industry support

Survey and interviews respondents stated their desire for industry support in the following ways:

- Teaching materials (exemplars or examples of activities or materials)
- Training and workshops on the topic
- Access to national guidelines
- Toolkits and resources
- Communities of practice on this topic
- Collection guidelines and training to help to manage mis/disinformation in collections and keep up to date on the issue



*"Guidelines around the balance between taking things away and making them inaccessible versus having something that's incorrect in the collection."*

*"The most obvious thing for me would be training and professional development which you know both organisations offer, but perhaps not quite as focused on this particular area."*

Library staff also pointed to good examples of toolkits, resources, forums and communities of practice that have been established or could be established in other areas and that would be beneficial on this topic as well.

> *"[CAUL] created toolkits and guidelines and workshops and a whole range of things [on open access]. If they want to do something in that space around misinformation and disinformation, I think it would be wonderful."*

> *"Would be good to facilitate national conversations on the topic using researchers in this space from Australian Universities as they have substantial knowledge of the area to share."*

## Conclusion and recommendations

Library staff in Australian academic libraries feel that libraries play a major role in managing dis/misinformation, however there is often a disparity between the library's view of the importance of their role and their university's strategic priorities or lack thereof in this area. University libraries recognise their role as experts in this space, but often it is not a strategic priority of the university.

> **Recommendation**: It is recommended that national associations advocate strategically around the importance of critical information/media literacy and the important role played by academic libraries in combating mis/disinformation through education and teaching, leading to essential lifelong critical evaluation skills for students.

Australian universities libraries do not have guidelines or policies on mis/disinformation beyond collection management procedures.

> **Recommendation**: It is recommended that library associations develop guidelines or policies to help support librarians manage any mis/disinformation in their collections.

Many library staff participating in this study indicated they would like more discussion or guidance at a national level of the library's role in countering/managing mis/disinformation (often historical) in their collections and this guidance could come from our associations or external experts. Staff look to organisations such as ALIA/CAUL for support through guidelines, professional development and training, resources and communities of practice to support them to continue to combat fake news, teach critical evaluation skills and maintain credible, balanced and inclusive collections.

> **Recommendation**: It is recommended that professional development activities such as training, resource development and communities of practice are developed on topics related to mis/disinformation as well as facilitation of national discussions. It is also recommended that more research on mis/disinformation and library collections is conducted in Australia.

## Mis/disinformation in libraries: Resource toolkit

### Libguides

- Curtin University: Fake news LibGuide
  https://libguides.library.curtin.edu.au/23things/fake-news
- Federation University: Fake news LibGuide
  https://libguides.federation.edu.au/fakenews
- University of South Australia: News media LibGuide
  https://guides.library.unisa.edu.au/NewsMedia/Home

- Charles Darwin University: Evaluating information LibGuide
  https://libguides.cdu.edu.au/evaluation

## Videos/Podcasts

- Swinburne University: Evaluating information
  https://commons.swinburne.edu.au/items/b29b3610-5f32-4a34-bcf2-41a74f7fafda/1/
- ALIA leadership series: Culturally safe libraries
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D-Ow9aVfI8
- Podcast: what does it mean to decolonise a library?
  https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/podcast-what-does-it-mean-decolonise-library

## Other resources

- Stanford History Education Group – Civic online reasoning
  https://cor.stanford.edu/
- University of Salford: Decolonising your reading list
  https://www.salford.ac.uk/library/find-resources/reading-lists/reading-lists-staff/decolonising-your-reading-list
- Cambridge University: Decolonisation-related library and archive work in Cambridge: a framework
  https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol13/iss1/7/
- University of Sydney: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols
  https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/24602
  About: https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2022/06/03/library-adopts-sector-leading-indigenous-protocols.html
- Media Literacy Framework for Australia
  https://medialiteracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/A3-Media-Literacy-Poster-web.pdf
- CAUL Indigenous Knowledges Symposium 2021 resources
  https://docs.google.com/document/d/11uJYKUekexMtvUUPTxqzlHZLHBKP3gpPX4NFSDFCixQ/edit
- News literacy Project
  https://newslit.org/

## Books

- *Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries* by Jess Crilly and Regina Everitt
  https://www.facetpublishing.co.uk/page/detail/narrative-expansions/?k=9781783304974
- *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith
  https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/decolonizing-methodologies-9781786998125/
- *Teaching about Fake News: Lesson Plans for Different Disciplines and Audiences* by Candice Benjes-Small, Carol Wittig and Mary K. Oberlies
  https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/teaching-about-fake-news-lesson-plans-different-disciplines-and-audiences
- *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers* (open access) by Mike Caulfield
  https://pressbooks.pub/webliteracy/