Critical Perspectives on the Pedagogy of "Post-Truth"

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Since the hard-right shift intensified by the U.S. presidential election in late 2016, the narrative of "post-truth" has gained prominence in discourses and practices of academic librarianship. We are living, the story goes, in an era characterized chiefly by misinformation—an age of "factual recession," in the words of Project Information Literacy (Head and Wihbey, 2017). Marked centrally by the rise of so-called "fake news," the media landscape has allegedly become increasingly murky, posing specific challenges for practices of source evaluation and analysis. Our relationship to the truth, it is said, is becoming increasingly tenuous.

In response, the library world has conspicuously positioned itself as the solution to this perceived crisis. Library workers (including those in academic institutions), as well as our professional organizations, have turned to the narrative of "post-truth" as a means of positioning themselves as engaged members of civil society—as agents "on the front lines" in the "fight" for the truth. Instruction librarians, in particular, develop lesson plans, LibGuides, and learning objects focused on "fake news" and fact-checking. Faculty partners and other external interest groups advocate that library instruction sessions prioritize such content. "Post-truth" has proliferated in discourses of the profession more broadly, appearing as a subject across association reports and toolkits, scholarly publications, presentations, and entire conferences.

This panel will raise critical questions about the limits of the post-truth narrative (and its attendant tropes), as well as the ramifications of its dominance in our profession. Drawing on analytical framings from both scholarly and literary communities, and from inside and outside the library world, we focus our critique on the characterization of the present moment (in our profession and beyond) as one of "post-truth;" the centering of factual accuracy and bias as the focus of news media analysis; and the conspicuous use of such tropes as a means of communicating library value. What might an interrogation of the assumptions underpinning such "post-truth" explanations reveal about the broader structures of social, political, and economic power that shape—and are shaped by—our profession and that materially (if differentially) regulate our lives as members of intersecting communities? And what, indeed, might such critique reveal about the ways in which "post-truth" narratives work to obscure such structures' operations and historical continuities?