

Librarians offer tips for spotting fake news

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By Christine A. Verstraete



Kenosha Public Library librarian Rachael Murphy talks about how to spot fake news during a program Sunday at Southwest Library. (PHOTO BY CHRISTINE VERSTRAETE)

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CORRESPONDENT

Telling the fake from the real news and websites can be done with a little investigating and looking for key signs.

That was the message Kenosha Public Library librarians Rachael Murphy and Rachel Becker told patrons at a special presentation Sunday called “Fake News, Can You Spot It?” at Southwest Library.

Murphy, adult and digital services librarian and a former Kenosha Unified teacher in digital services, said the defining feature of fake news is “to inform with the intent to be misleading to some degree.”

Becker, who is also a librarian at UW-Parkside, said computer users now have to be more careful and diligent in checking sources and sites.

“The election really brought it the forefront,” she said. “Pretty much any news topic now, there’s a fake news article on it. Fake news sites are becoming increasingly popular. It’s on everybody’s social news feed now. We’re being bombarded by it constantly.”

That’s why such a class is important, Murphy said.

“We wanted to do this because it’s a hot topic right now, especially because of digital media and how fast it spreads,” she said. “We want to get people aware of the information they consume and to actively think about it.”

Common elements

According to the women, some of the common elements of fake sites:

- Information that can be biased or exaggerated.
- Information that can be difficult to verify and often is not found in many places besides the original source.
- “Click-bait” headlines, enticing readers to follow through to websites that are often created to mislead and generate ad revenue.

Videos can be just as suspect, said Murphy, noting that videos can be re-shared and seem current, though they're older.

"If you do a search with a few words, you'll find older videos," she said. "Google is your best friend."

What to look for

So how do you spot the fake from the real? The librarians offered some tips:

- Watch out for websites made to look like legitimate news organizations that tack .co or other letters onto the end of the website address.
- Look for an author name and an "About" page with staff and contact information on the site.
- Search for the original source of the information and if it's on other credible news sites.
- Be aware of spelling and grammar errors.

Helpful tips

Kenoshan Fay Strubel, 70, said the program helped her to be more aware.

"I learned a lot, like looking at sites with all the ads on the sides," she said. "I've clicked on those before. I'll now look at things different."

Kenoshan Alice Ryan said she appreciated the checklist of things to look for when checking whether the information is fake or real.

"I think that's going to help me filter better," she said.

Going online now, she said, is "the modern version of rumors, eavesdropping and party lines. That's the places where you got fake news prior to the internet."

Spotting fake news

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions offers these tips for how to spot fake news:

- Consider the source. Investigate the site's mission and contact information.
- Read beyond. Consider the whole story beyond the outrageous headline.
- Check the author. Search for the name. Is it real and credible?
- Check the date. Old news may not be relevant with current events.
- Is it a joke? Too outlandish of stories may actually be satire. Check the author and site to be sure.
- Biases: Are your own beliefs affecting your judgment?
- Ask the experts. Ask librarians or research at fact-checking sites such as snopes.com, politifact.com, factcheck.org, opensecrets.org or reporterslab.org/fact-checking/.