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Evaluating Information: Where Do Librarians and Skeptics Align?

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Introduction

Although librarians may not realize it, our profession has many shared goals and values with those who consider themselves methodological or scientific skeptics—a term we denote here as “Skeptics” with a capital “S.” A thorough review of the literature indicates that, while a Skeptic attitude toward information is arguably important to the work of instruction librarians, no research has been conducted on the Skeptics of librarians.

The researchers of the present study surveyed a number of Librarians who teach information evaluation in an effort to explore the following research questions:

- What attitudes do Librarians have toward Skeptics and Skeptical values?
- How closely do the values of Librarians align with those of the Skeptic community?
- How much—and in what ways—do Librarians who teach information literacy instruction employ Skeptical values and principles?

Background: The “Skeptic Community”

The modern Skeptic community is thought to date back to Martin Gardner’s book, “The Name of the Rose,” published in 1952. Other early founders of the movement include James “The Amazing” Randi, a magician who appeared often on The Tonight Show and elsewhere in the media. Paul Kurtz, philosopher and founder of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which eventually became the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI); and Michael Shermer, the founder of the Skeptic Society and Skeptic Magazine. Intellectual and public figures from a variety of fields have become important (and controversial) voices for the Skeptic community as well, including the data scientist and popularizer of skepticism, Tufts University’s statistician, statistician and blogger Massimo Pigliucci; Center for Applied Rationality co-founder Julia Galef; and magicians Penn & Teller, among many others.

Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted via a web-based survey hosted online from a secure link using Qualtrics, and distributed through nine professional librarian e-mail lists. The study was submitted to, and accepted by, the institutional review boards of both Cleveland State University and Case Western Reserve University. The authors first designed a nineteen-item survey instrument to collect data about librarians’ attitudes toward, and application of, Skeptical principles. Of the 12 survey questions, two were open responses.

Responses were collected over the course of four weeks, and the survey data were subsequently cleaned and analyzed using Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. The responses of survey takers who took <2 min. to complete their responses were eliminated, as were respondents who identified themselves as non-librarians (e.g. subject faculty members) and those who skipped answering all non-demographic questions. The number of remaining responses was 498 (just over an initial total of 500). Open responses were assessed for overall themes and representative quotations.

Study limitations

The responses by Librarians to our study were self-selected, and the results may not be generalizable to all Librarians. While our survey instrument was piloted with several test participants before being deployed, it was not thoroughly evaluated for internal validity and reliability, resulting in a certain amount of unavoidable measurement error.

This study is meant to be a preliminary step toward understanding the role of Skeptics in information literacy instruction. We are fully aware of the many limitations of survey research, especially research which uses purpose sampling. While some barriers of research in this field are so difficult to overcome as to be impractical, others, we hope, can be addressed in future research.

The results of our survey are broken down into five sections: Demographics, Association, Alignment, Application of Skeptics to Information literacy instruction data not shown. The ‘Association’ section asked participants to associate specific words with Skeptics and Critical thinking. The ‘Alignment’ section prompted respondents with a series of statements corresponding to (in opposition to) Skeptical principles. Respondents were asked to indicate how closely each statement aligned with their personal beliefs, suggesting the extent to which Librarians’ values overlap with those of Skeptics.

The ‘Awareness’ section, participants indicated their awareness of the modern Skeptic movement and their willingness to identify as a Skeptic. Lastly, respondents were asked to share how frequently and in what ways they apply skepticism principles when teaching information literacy. The section included an open-response question which yielded a variety of librarians’ self-reported methods for teaching source evaluation. The final survey question asked respondents to share any comments or concerns they had with the survey overall, and these comments may be found in the Padlet linked on our research guide.

Results

Figure 1. Digital artifacts of the Skeptic community from top left: Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (a component of the Center for Inquiry), Skeptic Magazine, the Skeptics Society, Skeptical Inquirer, Skeptic magazine logo, Skeptic logo. "The logo for Skeptical Inquirer is the logo for the "Skeptics in the Kitchen" a monthly live video conference in the series—which uses https://www.skeptic.com/ (Skeptic oasis, official publication of the skeptic movement), from left to the Cleveland skeptics logo, New York City skeptics logo.

Figure 2. Percentage of survey respondents (n=499) reporting number of open questions asking if a librarian might be a skeptic.

Figure 3. Number of survey respondents (n=499) reporting the type of library or archive they work in. Note: survey respondents could choose more than one answer.

Figure 4. Number of academic librarian survey respondents (n=242) reporting discipline or subject area they support.

Figure 5. Numbers of respondents (n=477) answering the nine questions shown above regarding their awareness of Skeptics, Skepticism, and the Skeptic community. The third question (light) also probes survey takers’ self-awareness regarding whether they might call themselves Skeptics, given the definitions presented in the survey.

Association of Terms with Skepticism vs. Critical Thinking

Figure 6. Survey respondents were asked to associate the above words with either “Skepticism” or “Critical Thinking,” and the numbers of associations with either are shown above. The words in black text (“Analytical” through “Truth-seeking”) were coded in having either positive or neutral importance, according to our perspective, whereas the words in red text (“Subjective” through “Value taking”) were coded as having “negative” associations.

Figure 7. Proportion of survey responses (n=499) responding to "very nice", "good", "neutral", or "bad" to each graphic effect. The y-axis of each graph is the percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed with the statement on the x-axis. The statements included: "The science of psychology involves a lot of love and emotion at times."

Application of Skepticism to Information Literacy Instruction

When asked whether they “Always,” “Often,” “Sometimes,” “Rarely,” or “Never” do the following, the majority of respondents who reported having information literacy instruction responsibilities (n=388) reported that they “Always” or “Often” encouraged students to cast thought for facts using sound evidence (39.3%), to find the most reliable evidence possible, to check the evidence of claims, to question the truth claims of stereotypes and biases, to also critically examine the information they received, to critically examine and verify the information they were given, and to critically evaluate and verify the information they were given.

Selected Open-Response Comments

Of the total number of survey respondents (n=499), 128 responded to the open question, “Do you have any comments about Skepticism, information evaluation instruction, or this survey?” Selected responses to these questions are displayed here.

In an era of “fake news,” Skeptics and information literacy librarians are natural partners in education.

I find librarians are often insufficiently skeptical of other librarians.

I wasn’t aware of Skepticism as a movement and will be looking into it more. It doesn’t sound negative—I suppose everyone should have a healthy amount of skepticism when investigating claims—but it still confuses images of climate change deniers for me.

My understanding of skepticism is based largely on Carl Sagan’s The Burden of Proof. Skepticism is a movement, and I think it would be helpful for librarians to read this book. I would also recommend The Accidental Canadian: The Skeptic’s Guide to the British Isles.

I have heard that the Skepticism Movement has been accused of being very non-diverse, made up of mostly older white men, with allegiances of sexual harassment toward women in the movement; many “skeptic” also have a reputation for being kind, righteous, angry, and rude. This is based on my limited Wikipedia-level knowledge of Skepticism. Perhaps some people might be more inclined to consider themselves “skeptic” if these issues within the movement were addressed.

Learn more on our accompanying research guide! Visit http://www.csuohio.edu/library/skep and click on the list of links to learn about our future research on this topic.