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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 here denote 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 information librarians, no research has been conducted on the Skeptics of Librarians.

The reviewers of the present study surveyed a variety 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 attitudes 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 books, “The Name of the Game”, 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 science popularizer, statistician and philosopher Massimo Pigliucci; Center for Applied Rationality co-founder Jola Gietel, 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-question survey instrument to collect data about librarians’ attitudes toward, and application of, Skeptical principles. Of the 25 survey questions, two were open responses.

Results

The results of our survey are broken down into five sections: Demographics, Association, Alignment, Awareness, and Application of Skeptical values to Information literacy instruction (Data not shown). The “Association” section asked participants to associate specific words with Skeptical and critical thinking. The “Alignment” section prompted respondents with a series of questions corresponding to (or in opposition to) Skeptical principles. Respondents were asked to indicate how closely each statement aligned with their personal values, suggesting the extent to which Librarians’ values overlap with those of Skeptics. In 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 applied Skeptical principles when teaching information literacy. The survey 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.

Alignment of Statements with Personal Beliefs

Evidential Basis for Belief

Truth from Intuition vs. Reasoning from Evidence

Corrigibility

Corroboration

Appropriate Skepticism

Expert Consensus

Parapsychology (Skeptical of Occam’s Razor)

Sufficient Evidence vs. Benefit of the Doubt

Appropriate Expertise

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=288) reported that they “Always” or “Often” encouraged students to do research to determine information that lacks sufficient evidence (58.2%), to re-evaluate their beliefs based on new evidence (54.4%), and to examine the expert consensus within a subject or discipline as part of the source evaluation process (77.6%). 123 of this group who submitted responses to the open question, “What activities or exercises do you use to teach information evaluation?” (See our research guide for a list of representative responses.)

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 Skeptical, 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 the Skepticism Movement is based largely on Carl Sagan’s The Burden of Proof which complements and has informed my approach to critical thinking and evaluation of information.

I have heard that the Skepticism Movement has been accused of being very non-diverse, made up of mostly older white men, with allegations of sexual harassment towards women in the movement; many “skeptic” also have a reputation for being bigoted, 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://newsguides.case.edu/skeptics.htm to see a list of our sources, a recommended reading list, and, as requested, a quick refresher to receive updates about our future research on this topic.