ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 infodemic has not only challenged the resilience of library and information science (LIS) programs but also prompted them to revamp academic curricula, develop innovative approaches for delivering content, and equip students with skills to help them become active agents in improving society. This study presents a qualitative content analysis of people’s perceptions about Covid-19 infodemic challenges across two diverse information environments in Finland and the U.S. The analysis reveals global concerns about pandemic-related misinformation and its negative impact on public health, civic engagement and people’s overall well-being. Findings also highlight considerable differences between the media, political, and information landscapes in both countries, and their overall impact on people’s information experiences. This study also demonstrates how the Covid-19 infodemic prompted two LIS programs in these countries to expand their information literacy curricula, and discusses the implications for building resilient communities with everyday life information literacy skills.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information literacy; information needs; information seeking; curriculum; education programs/schools; community engagement

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Covid-19 infodemic; information practices; everyday life information literacy; media; socio-cultural perspectives

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a worldwide impact on the population, global economy, and educational institutions. Furthermore, it has spurred the development of an infodemic, a...
phenomenon in which staggering amounts of information, both inaccurate and accurate, rapidly circulate in society during times of crisis (WHO, 2020). The Covid-19 infodemic has not only challenged the resilience of library and information science (LIS) programs but also prompted them to revamp academic curricula, develop innovative approaches for delivering content, and equip students with skills to help them become active agents in improving society. This study presents findings of people’s perceptions about Covid-19-related misinformation across two diverse information environments in Finland and the U.S. Moreover, it also demonstrates how the Covid-19 infodemic prompted two LIS programs to revamp their information literacy (IL) curricula and discusses implications for building resilient communities with everyday life IL skills in these two countries. The study addresses the following specific research questions:

- What are people’s perceptions of Covid-19-related misinformation?
- How did the Covid-19 infodemic change the trajectory of IL education in two LIS programs in Finland and the U.S.?
- What are the implications for everyday life IL in the post-truth era?

BACKGROUND

People depend on the media to help make sense of the deluge of information presented to them, especially in times of crisis. Covid-19 information can be found everywhere—via a quick Google search, while scrolling through social media, in text messages from friends and family or TV and internet news, on government websites, and in research journal articles. This information overload is exacerbated by Covid-19-related misinformation, conspiracy theories, conflicting narratives from experts, sensational stories from media, partisan politics, etc. Subsequently, “facts and evidence have been replaced by personal belief and emotion,” and news outlets and people receiving information are moving toward “a belief- and emotion-based market” (Rochlin, 2017, p. 386). Due to the nature of information gathering in the post-truth era and the high volumes of conflicting information about the pandemic, many people have trouble navigating this information landscape.

In order to handle the amount of information that is being received, a certain level of information literacy is required. Information professionals utilize their skills to sift through information for the general public, but if community members are able to become information literate, they will be able to determine how much information is needed, access the necessary information, and evaluate the information and its sources for authority, bias, and relevance (Hoq, 2016). Savolainen (1995) explored the idea of everyday life information seeking, but more research is needed to develop approaches for empowering communities with everyday life information literacy skills (Martzoukou & Sayyad Abdi, 2017) that would help them manage infodemics in times of public health crisis.

Everyday life information literacy (ELIL) is the idea that information literacy should expand beyond higher education and “relate to everyday practices as well as making informed decisions that are of significant value to individuals and communities” (Martzoukou & Sayyad Abdi, 2017, p. 634). They attribute ELIL to four different categories based on their own research into information literacy literature: leisure and community activities, citizenship and the fulfilment of social roles, public health, and critical life situations. Information professionals
have been adept at addressing information literacy in higher education institutions through implementing comprehensive information literacy plans, course-integrated library instruction, discipline-specific information literacy, embedded librarianship, and implementing information literacy into the first-year experience (Jarson, 2010). These same information literacy skills taught within higher education to aid with work can be transferred into society as everyday life information literacy.

Library and information science (LIS) graduate programs have a responsibility to facilitate information literacy education and prepare instructional librarians for the field. While IL is integrated throughout all LIS courses, Mbau (2009) found that an increasing number of programs have created classes specifically focused on library-user IL. However, the Covid-19 infodemic challenges LIS educators to develop educational programs and courses specifically designed to equip future information professionals with skills to design, develop, and deliver programs that would empower people to handle misinformation and fake news. Therefore, it makes sense to equip students with everyday life IL skills for managing infodemics in the post-truth era. Critically thinking citizens are of key importance for a resilient society (Heiss 2020), but to guarantee this, we need to better understand how citizens’ information literacy adapts to the new infodemic age.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

An almost identical qualitative survey was circulated between 3/15/2020 and 5/15/2020 in Finland and 4/5/2020 and 6/4/2020 in the U.S. The survey was distributed online through various listserv, social media outlets, and Facebook groups throughout both countries. The survey targeted a wide variety of people, regardless of background or geographical location; respondents included librarians, information professionals, archivists, lawyers, accountants, teachers, pastors, and students, among others. Additionally, an appeal was made to the survey participants to pass on the survey link onto others who may have been interested in responding. A qualitative content analysis approach was utilized to identify respondents’ perceptions about Covid-19-related misinformation. A brief description of the sample characteristics from both countries is given below.

The Finnish sample included 261 participants from various geographical areas. Around 41% of the entire sample came from the Southwest region and included cities such as Turku (28%), Helsinki (11%), and Tampere (2%). The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 79 with an average age of 45. Of the 261 respondents, 78.5% were female, 19% were male, and 2.3% chose not to disclose gender. While most of the respondents were employed (70%), a small number of participants included students (12%) and retirees (11%). The analysis reveals that around 4% of respondents were either diagnosed with Covid-19 or were familiar with someone in their immediate environment who received a positive diagnosis. Similarly, 19% of respondents indicated that they belonged to a group considered at high risk for Covid-19.

The U.S. sample included 1979 participants from various geographical regions including 48 states and Washington, D.C.; the majority of these respondents were from New York (19.1%), California (13.2%), and Michigan (11.7%). The respondents represented various age groups ranging from 18-88 years old. Respondents were overwhelmingly female (82.9%); males accounted for 14.3% of the sample, while 2.7% of participants identified either as LGBTQ+, or
did not wish to disclose their gender. While a majority of respondents were employed (83.4%), a relatively small number of participants included people from self-employed (3.9%) unemployed (2.2%), retired (8.5%), homemaker (3.2%), and veteran (1.4%) categories. A small percentage of respondents (10.7%) were either students and/or belonged to the categories indicated above. The analysis reveals that 6.6% of respondents were either diagnosed with Covid-19 or knew someone in their immediate environment who received a positive diagnosis. Similarly, 37.1% of respondents indicated that they belonged to a group considered at high risk for severe Covid-19 infection.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of people about the Covid-19 related misinformation

Findings of the Finnish data identified five major themes: information provision, relations/attitudes, emotions, society and effects on it, and evaluation of information (Eriksson-Backa, 2020). Further analysis reveals that respondents were perplexed by the inflow of vast amounts of information. The respondents harbored obvious negative emotions triggered by information overload and other adversities. While most people suffered adversity, few were content with the availability of information. Humor and satire were seen as possible coping tools. Nevertheless, misinformation and disinformation were a huge concern for some respondents (9%) and were sources of anxiety and frustration affecting their emotional well-being. Some also had mixed feelings about the amount and quality of information coming from the authorities. Some respondents commented that “communication in the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic was too careful” and criticized the responsiveness of the authorities in managing the pandemic. People were mostly satisfied with the media information; they also emphasized the importance of the format. Regarding the effect of the pandemic on interpersonal relations, the respondents showed concern and empathy. The majority reported suffering from anxiety, yet the respondents showed trust in the communications. They also seemed well-informed and confident about their information handling skills. Some respondents raised concerns about the politicization of information and its negative impact on society, and remarked that it is “unpleasant to notice that Coronavirus is used as a political weapon.” Some were concerned about a possible future economic downfall, and they compared Finland’s activities with those of other countries, since information about global development is readily available.

A majority of the U.S. respondents (64%) perceived Covid-19-related misinformation as quite problematic. At the same time, a small number of respondents (3.8%) felt occasionally troubled by false information about the pandemic. Interestingly, some respondents (10.3%) indicated that misinformation about the pandemic was “not a problem for them but for others.” A substantial number of respondents (26.8%) highlighted public health as their major concern and how “misleading information and rumors” were affecting their “emotional well-being” and putting “all of society at risk.” A small number of respondents (5.9%) raised concerns about civic engagement and alluded to how “false information causes unnecessary fear and panic in the community” and can “endanger the health, finances, and civil rights of many.” Some respondents were troubled by conflicting expert opinions (4.7%) and noted their distrust of the media (4.6%). Quite a few respondents raised concerns about politicized information and how it impacted their interpersonal relationships with family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc. (1.3%). Some
respondents also highlighted their distrust of the federal government (2.3%), Fox News, and President Trump (7%). In contrast, the Covid-19 infodemic did not pose any problems for a substantial number of respondents (21.2%). A majority of these respondents were confident about their information handling skills and utilized information avoidance as a coping mechanism to maintain their emotional well-being against the uncontrollable stream of information. They were concerned that “too many people believe inaccurate information and act on it,” and emphasized the need to empower communities with IL skills for navigating through the complexities of the post-truth information environments.

The IL education approaches of two LIS programs

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many educational institutions to revisit their curricula and develop innovative strategies for delivering content. Below we present how the Covid-19 infodemic promoted two LIS programs in Finland and the U.S. to revamp their IL education approaches and discuss the implications for building resilient communities to face the challenges of post-truth information environments.

For several years, IL has been part of multiple courses at both the bachelor’s and master’s levels in a Finnish LIS program at Åbo Akademi University. However, given the growing challenge of “information disorder” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5), IL has been emphasized as both as a competence to support within library and information services, as well as one necessary for everyday life. IL is conceptualized in the context of individual information handling skills (e.g., courses on information behavior, information seeking), and in the context of service development (e.g., information society, information service management). Course feedback has shown that students find IL highly interesting and important, and they can easily relate to its challenges, which lays an excellent groundwork for experiential learning.

The LIS program at St. John’s University has traditionally imparted IL education through its foundational and elective courses. However, the Covid-19 infodemic, civil unrest, and racial tensions prompted it to expand its IL curriculum by developing a new course specifically covering “Fake News and Misinformation.” This course emphasizes access to authoritative information as a social justice issue and equips students with the necessary IL skills, strategies, and resources to address fake news, misinformation and conspiracy theories, and their implications for public health, civic engagement, and people’s overall well-being. Students demonstrate their appreciation for sharpening their critical thinking skills in analyzing media and information landscape, informational belief systems, infodemic management approaches, and designing a misinformation awareness program for improving people’s information handling skills for everyday life.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed many challenges presented by the current information environments. A majority of respondents (78%) in the U.S. perceived Covid-19-related misinformation as quite troubling. Many respondents appeared to be concerned about the negative impact of the Covid-19 infodemic on public and personal health, civic engagement, and people’s overall well-being. Some people displayed trust in believing experts, reputable organizations, politicians, media, and evidence-based information. In contrast, some respondents
(9%) in Finland found pandemic-related misinformation and disinformation concerning, and reflected on its negative impact on overall society and civic engagement. While some respondents raised concerns about the politicization of information, a majority of them appeared to be satisfied with the information received from the media and authoritative sources. Many respondents in the U.S. raised concerns about people’s information handling skills and emphasized the need to empower communities with IL skills to help them navigate post-truth information environments. Similarly, Finnish respondents also advocated for preparing communities with suitable skills and approaches for evaluating information.

This study also highlights how the Covid-19 infodemic prompted two LIS programs in both countries to revamp their IL curricula. The growing challenge of information epidemics prompted an LIS program in Finland to emphasize the importance of IL competence in information handling for everyday life through several courses. Similarly, the amplification of misinformation, multidisciplinary growth of infodemiology (WHO, 2020), civil unrest, and racism triggered the development of a new course on “Fake News and Misinformation” in an LIS program in the U.S.; it equips students with skills to design and develop programs that empower communities with everyday life IL skills. While the IL education approaches differ in these programs, both make concerted efforts to prepare students with critical thinking and an everyday life IL mindset in order to meet the challenges of contemporary information environments (Martzoukou & Sayyad Abdi, 2017).

Overall, the findings highlight global concerns about Covid-19-related misinformation and its negative impact on public health, civic engagement and people’s overall well-being. However, there are considerable differences in the media, political, and information landscapes, and their overall impacts on people’s information experiences in Finland and the U.S. The study also highlights implications for equipping students with everyday life IL skills to help them become active agents in improving society. Although no IL course or program can possibly prepare students and people for every potential information crisis, they can certainly equip them to be confident and nimble in their information handling skills to navigate through the increasingly complex information environments of the post-truth era.

REFERENCES

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