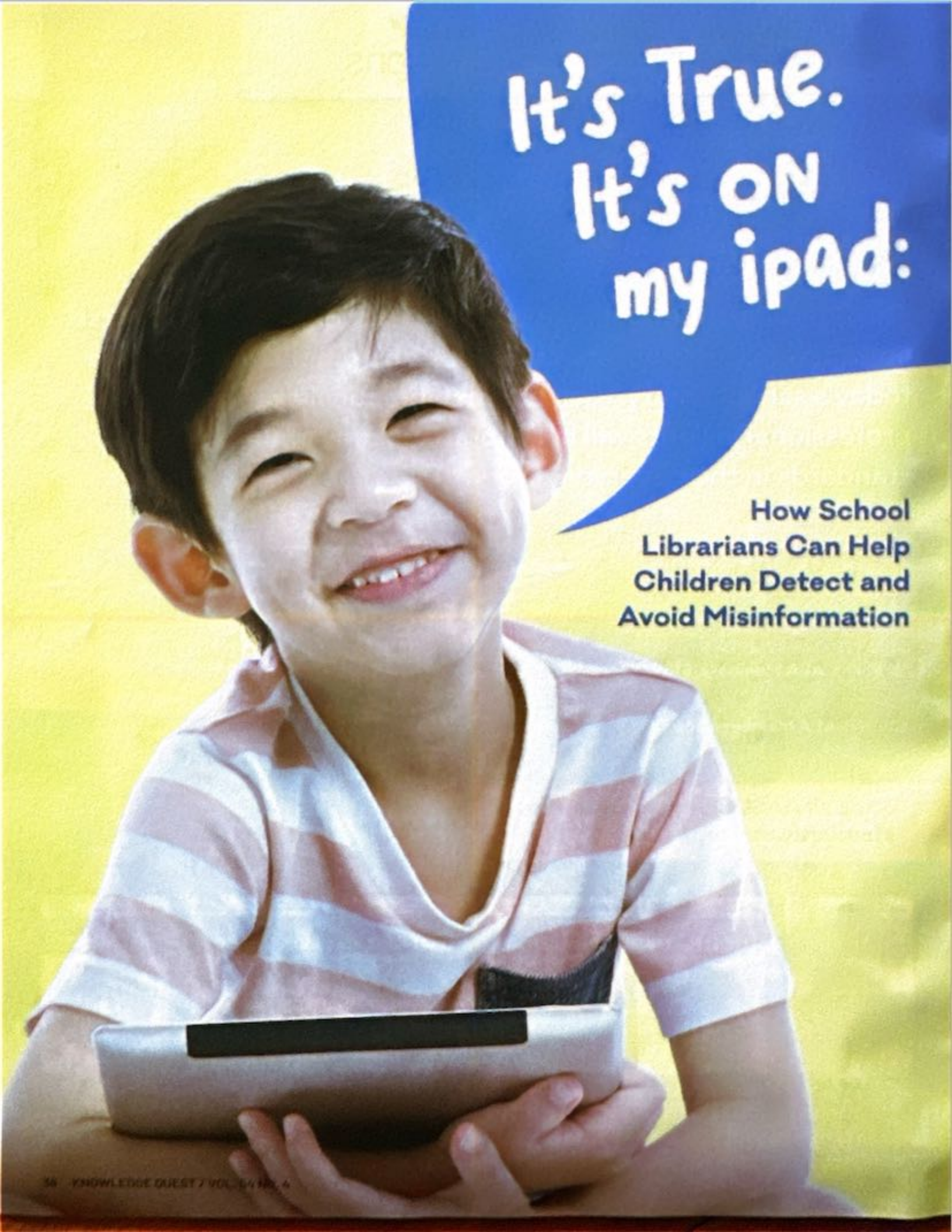
It's True. It's ON my ipad:

How School Librarians Can Help Children Detect and Avoid Misinformation



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Dr. Tara Zimmerman is an Assistant Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University where her teaching focuses on school library technology. As a former K-12 librarian for eight years, she is passionate about helping children develop foundational information literacy and critical thinking skills to navigate our increasingly chaotic information ecosystem. She hopes to use the lessons created through the Awareness and Critical Thinking(ACT)program to develop play-based resources for children to continue learning these vital concepts outside the classroom. Beyond this project, Zimmerman's research encompasses a wide variety of topics related to human information behavior in new media contexts, particularly social media. She is an active member of AASL, ALA, and the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE). To learn more about her research and scholarship, visit www.tarazimmerman.net

BY **DR. TARA ZIMMERMAN**

A colleague told me about an interaction he had with his four-year-old son. The boy mentioned ghosts being scary, and dad assured him that ghosts were not real. The boy adamantly argued with his father before leaving the room in frustration.

HE SOON CAME BACK WITH HIS IPAD and showed his dad a video he'd been watching on YouTube Kids featuring animated ghosts dancing to lively music. The boy said, "See, Dad? It's true. It's on my iPad." This conversation highlights an issue that is increasingly facing educators, parents, and society as a whole: As children access online content at younger and younger ages, how do we help them understand what is true and what information they can trust?

Need

School-age children are especially vulnerable to misinformation and use social media at increasingly higher rates (McClain). In fact, K-12 students experienced a 50% increase in exposure to misinformation from 2018-21. Children are especially vulnerable to misinformation because their critical thinking and reasoning capabilities are still developing (Howard et al.). Young people tend to care less about the accuracy of information and are instead motivated by novelty, making them more vulnerable to believing and spreading misinformation (Herrero-Diz et al.).

Survey

In January and February of 2024, I led a national survey of school librarians, asking them how misinformation is currently being addressed with K-5 students. Participants responded to a structured survey comprising multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The survey consisted of eight questions focused on various facets of information literacy instruction, including available time for teaching, resources utilized, and instructional approaches. We analyzed the data collected from 141 librarians who had an average of 11 years' experience in school libraries serving elementary students.

Results

The current situation is not ideal. The majority of participants reported only having access to "some" resources to teach this age group about misinformation and related information literacy skills while 16% reported having access to no resources at all for this purpose. School librarians currently use a hodgepodge of assorted curricula and materials to teach information literacy skills to K-5 students.

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However, these resources are mainly directed toward older grade levels and are not adequate to address the needs of younger K-5 students. Librarians are collecting lessons from a wide range of sources, most of which must be heavily edited and adapted to be suitable for the K-5 audience, creating additional labor for librarians and resulting in teaching that varies widely from school to school and state to state.

Time is an issue as well. About half the librarians said they only teach information literacy skills to their learners once or twice per year and that they have no time available in their schedules to plan more teaching of information literacy skills. When asked what instructional approaches they believed would be most effective in teaching these skills to their learners, the librarians recommended storytelling, modeling behavior, and both online and offline activities.

Answers to the question, "What do you see as your students' biggest needs regarding understanding the dangers of misinformation?" fell into four categories: awareness, identification, resources, and risk of harm.

Awareness

Survey responses highlighted the need for young learners to understand that not all information, particularly online content, is reliable. One librarian said, "The same students who dutifully tell me that they don't trust everything on the internet tell me about their interactions with others on platforms such as Roblox, where they take what they are told by other players at face value." Overall, responses labeled with this theme emphasize children's naivete and tendency to trust information implicitly.

Identification

Librarians articulated the necessity for students to learn skills to discern misinformation across various formats and critically evaluate the reliability of all kinds of information. Responses emphasized learners' ability to identify trustworthy sources, recognizing bias, and employing critical analysis skills. One librarian summed this up by saying, "Our students' biggest misunderstanding of information is how to know if a source is reliable, with accurate information."

Resources

Participants expressed a need for age-appropriate curriculum, materials, and examples tailored to the needs of K-5 students. For example, a librarian responded, "In my district, those of us who do *anything* are forced to improvise our own curriculum," and "The kids have [online] access mostly on phones and iPads, which means needing to identify misinformation on YouTube, Twitch, and TikTok." Beyond teaching materials, librarians expressed the need for more time to dedicate to this type of instruction.

Risk of Harm

Librarians' survey answers reflected concern about potential consequences of inadequate misinformation education for learners, such as them falling prey to conspiracy theories or scams. One said, "They truly don't understand the danger or how easy it is to be misinformed." Another participant said, "Even the ability for kids to see how *easy* it is to fake something by doing it themselves would be valuable."

Action

Overall, the results of this survey demonstrate a critical need for informational literacy curriculum in K-5 school libraries. There are no widespread, multistate programs targeting this specific age group with these types of skills. Using data collected from this survey as a starting point, I led the development of an information literacy curriculum aimed at K-5 learners, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant. The curriculum was written and compiled by Dr. Faith Rogow, an expert in early childhood media literacy, and uses developmentally appropriate examples to teach kids to think critically about the information they are consuming.

Elementary school librarians in Texas, Oklahoma, and New York were recruited to pilot the curriculum with their learners throughout the 2024-25 school year, and they used the lessons with hundreds of learners. After revising and improving the lessons based on the librarians' feedback, we made the lessons available for free online via Project Look Sharp (www.projectlooksharp.org/?action=act) and continue to promote the lessons to elementary librarians and teachers.

Next Steps

Beyond the dearth of instructional resources, the lack of time for teaching these critical skills is a significant challenge. Under current circumstances, librarians must advocate for administrators to allocate more consistent time for school librarians to deliver information literacy instruction, particularly focusing on the detection and avoidance of misinformation, throughout the academic calendar.

Conclusion

By equipping learners with the critical thinking skills necessary to discern and navigate the vast information landscape, particularly in their formative years, we empower them to become responsible citizens and more discerning consumers. Even among older children who may be knowledgeable about internet scams, there remains a lack of sensitivity to the subtler forms of information manipulation. School librarians can combat these potential harms by using our expertise in information literacy and teaching thoughtful information-seeking practices, even to our youngest learners. The long-term benefits of this investment in education are immeasurable and promise to positively impact the lives of learners well beyond their time in the classroom.

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RECENT PUBLICATIONS:

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RECENT AWARDS:

Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian 3 Year Early Career Research Grant

National Science Foundation and Computing Research Association Computing Innovation Fellow 2020

Organization memberships: American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association, Texas Library Association, Association for Library and Information Science Education, Association for Information Science and Technology