Mystery Fiction for Misinformation Resilience: Exploring Connections between Teens’ Leisure Reading and Online Misinformation Practices

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Abstract

This paper discusses the research project funded by the Young Adult Library Association’s 2021 Frances Henne Research Grant. It sought to explore whether the reading of mystery fiction novels influenced teens’ online misinformation practices; and if so, how. Data collection involved an international survey of readers of Robin Stevens’ Murder Most Unladylike series (alternate title Wells & Wong Mysteries) and Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events.

Several themes in teens’ responses were represented in the categories of online misinformation practices and mystery fiction reading for both book series, but there was a divergence in the broader attitudes of respondents between book series. From these findings, a series of original activities to support information literacy education for use in library and school contexts were produced with the support of an accredited librarian consultant. This study contributes to our broader understanding of teens’ online misinformation practices and reading practices through incorporating their voices.

Introduction

Social media provides fertile ground for online misinformation and even conspiracy theories to thrive and reach teens. For example, in 2020, the platform TikTok became home to a bizarre conspiracy theory that disability activist Helen Keller never existed. “Generation Z literally does not believe Helen Keller existed. And frankly, I’m having a hard time accepting that she did.
myself,” noted a May 13, 2020, article discussing the conspiracy theory. As the article author goes on to note, teens should not be blamed for what they do not know, particularly if it is not taught in schools. However, the easy access to unverified information that social media provides to teens who are still developing their information literacy skills is a matter of concern, as the above example illustrates.

“Misinformation” is a broad category that scholars have struggled to define, which can include not just deliberately fabricated stories such as conspiracy theories and so-called “fake news,” but also generic false information, rumors, and unverified information. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, belief in misinformation has the potential to result in extreme consequences of violence, sickness, or even death. Early COVID-19 pandemic misinformation saw a drastic increase in racist, anti-Chinese sentiments that at times culminated in verbal harassment or physical violence. The rise of vaccine misinformation has fueled vaccine hesitancy on a global scale; a trend that places people at greater risk of catching and potentially dying from COVID-19. Despite this, social media platforms have been reluctant to remove misinformation, and the actions that have been taken have had a limited effectiveness.

This paper discusses the findings of the research project Exploring the potential of reading truth-seeking fiction to build information literacy and misinformation resilience, which was funded by the Young Adult Library Association’s (YALSA) 2021 Frances Henne Research Grant. The study sought to determine whether teens’ reading of mystery fiction novels—novels in which protagonists must distinguish truth from falsehoods—influenced their abilities to think critically about online misinformation. Primary data collection involved a survey of teen readers of two book series on their online misinformation practices and responses to fictional characters and events. The findings provide insights that lay the foundations for future research in this area and provided the basis for developing a series of activities for use in library and school contexts to support teens’ information literacy education.

**Literature Review**

In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) director-general discussed the need to support teens in an increasingly digital world, stating “Our task must be to empower a new generation of digital citizens at the global level—starting with education, new intercultural skills, and deeper media and information literacy.”

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themselves are a demographic about which there is particular concern in the context of information literacy, as they have been found to overestimate their ability in identifying “fake news” and other types of misinformation online. Additional past research has found individuals who do not know their own gaps in knowledge are more susceptible to making incorrect assessments of information. Therefore, the teens who are most at risk may also be less likely to request clarification when they are uncertain, or to volunteer for library, school, or community programs that explicitly aim to support them in developing strategies to respond to unverified information or misinformation.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which produced a surge in online misinformation, has made the priority of information literacy education even more urgent—and in the battle to combat it, librarians have been on the forefront since the beginning. These efforts can be understood as an extension of their work in supporting their clients in developing information literacy and distinguishing facts from falsities. However, as information literacy education for teens is typically integrated with digital citizenship education or similar school curriculum programs, other adults—such as librarians—have been left under-resourced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Simply engaging teens in library programs on this topic poses its own challenge for which new strategies are necessary.

YALSA’s “National Research Agenda on Libraries, Learning, and Teens, 2017–2021,” the strategy in place at the time of this project’s development, listed “The Impact of Libraries as Teen Formal and Informal Learning Environments” as Priority Area 1, calling for the creation and facilitation of informal learning environments to support “learning that is powered by [teens’] personal interests” and is “peer supported,” in which adults act as mentors instead of instructors. Such an approach to learning can facilitate what is called “passive learning,” the learning that occurs when the individual is engaged in an activity chosen for entertainment purposes. Interest-driven, youth-led programs and spaces also attribute value to teens’ interests and lives and counter the hierarchical structure typically seen in school classrooms—and produce greater learning outcomes. Therefore, at a global level, there are calls for education that empowers teens and learning that can engage teens based on their interests and concerns. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these needs are increasingly urgent.
1. Non-Curriculum Information Literacy Education Resources

A brief review of notable, dedicated resources for information literacy education outside of school curriculums, which may provide support for parents, librarians, and community leaders, also highlights their limitations. In this section, I discuss only key examples from my review of these resources out of consideration of article length. In the United States, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), founded in 1997, publishes a journal of scholarly research in the field as well as resources for parents and teachers about teaching media literacy and challenging COVID-19 misinformation.16 One example resource is the NAMLE Building Healthy Relationships with Media: A Parent’s Guide to Media Literacy, which emphasizes the importance of teaching children to question content and provides example conversations a parent may have with their child around fake news, advertisements, YouTube videos, and online spam.17 While valuable for use with children, the language and tone of the document is too simplistic to be applicable to conversations with teens. The NAMLE teachers’ resource Slowing the Infodemic: How to Spot COVID-19 Misinformation, which is labeled as intended for secondary school students, poses a more suitable level of challenge for teens; however, as a lesson plan, it is only suitable for classroom use with a teacher.18 Despite the value of this resource for teachers, it also has limitations on its use.

The Canadian organization MediaSmarts, founded in 1994, provides a broader range of resources. Support for parents includes video workshops and blog posts from other parents about supporting their child’s information literacy learning.19 Teacher support includes licensed professional development courses, detailed lesson plans under a range of topics, and guidance on how to match these lesson plans with required curriculum outcomes.20 For example, the Media Literacy 101 series of lesson plans focuses on distinguishing different forms of media and understanding their commercial interests and implications for politics and society.21 The Digital Literacy 101 program explores critical thinking about media with regard to a range of issues—not just verifying information, but also the implications of media representations of various communities.22 It is under the topics of Digital Citizenship and Authenticating Information that a series of lessons called “Break the Fake” are located, which provide teacher resources including class activities and assessments about identifying fake media, as well as resources on developing empathy.23 While the emphasis of MediaSmarts is on lesson plans and school-based education, they also host several online games predominantly based on online safety and privacy.24 One
notable exception is *Reality Check: The Game*, which asks players to fact-check fictional news stories that may or may not be true on a cartoon social media feed. While this gamified approach is likely more engaging to children than lesson plans, the appeal of this game to teens is questionable given its repetitive tasks, simplistic writing, and cartoon graphic style.

In Australia, the options for resources on information literacy education are considerably more limited. The Australian Government’s Office of the eSafety Commissioner has only one resource for children and one for teens on fake news, with an emphasis on fact-checking; and misinformation is not included among the six “big issues” listed for parents to be aware of. In contrast, the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) provides a considerable suite of resources for both children and teens, and teachers. The resources available for children and teens include videos explaining the processes involved in journalism and news reporting, ranging in tone from playful illustrated videos to interviews with experts and practitioners, to an online fact-checking game called *Source Checker* and a targeted series of videos about COVID-19 misinformation. Resources for teachers include advice on how to incorporate media literacy education into existing subjects including mathematics, science, English, and the arts, some classroom activities to use, and a series of short videos providing general advice on teaching the topic. While it may seem surprising that a public broadcaster provides greater support than the Australian Government for education about misinformation and information literacy, the ABC is highly regarded in Australia for its education initiatives. This includes the popular and acclaimed *Behind the News* (BTN) program, which commenced in 1968, explains current affairs to children in an entertaining way, and is accompanied by its own activities for children and teacher resources.

Nevertheless, the ABC’s approach to information literacy faces similar limitations to the resources provided by NAMLE and MediaSmart: the target demographics of the resources are primarily teachers and children. This lack of resources targeted towards teens further silos their information literacy education into the secondary school classroom. The explicit educational focus in the above resources, including the games and informative videos, makes it doubtful that teens would seek such resources out for personal enjoyment. Likewise, the lesson plans mimic traditional hierarchical classroom structures with the teacher imparting knowledge to students—an approach that does not reflect UNESCO’s call for education that can “empower” teens or YALSA’s priority of interest-driven learning. New strategies are required to address this need.
2. Project Context and Conceptual Underpinnings

Shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), who support public libraries and library practitioners, issued a press release about data reflecting the recent reading trends of Australians. While the report focused on the high borrowing rates of Australian fiction, I was intrigued by the high representation of crime, thriller, and mystery novels on the Top 20 list by authors such as James Patterson, Lee Child, Jane Harper, and Michael Robotham. Soon after, I encountered an article in *The Guardian* by Alison Flood that reported on early 2020 reading trends in the United Kingdom and observed a surge in the reading of “crime and thrillers” amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also around the same time, I was hired as a research assistant on a project lead by Dr. Amelia Johns about the spread of online misinformation, which has required me to closely study this content online. As someone who had worked in bookselling for nearly a decade, and who was working on her doctoral dissertation on Australian teenagers’ reading practices, I was fascinated by the shift in leisure reading trends in the context of a pandemic and the subsequent misinformation influx. In particular, I was intrigued by the role of “seeking the truth” in consuming both mystery fiction narratives and misinformation narratives.

Through my doctoral studies, I had encountered two perspectives on how clarity or uncertainty in fiction novels may influence the child or teen reader. The first I characterized as more of a *skills-based approach*, in which a reader’s ability to negotiate complexity in a narrative is valued. With this view, fictional narratives that contain high levels of uncertainty and feature unresolved or ambiguous plot resolutions are considered to be the domain of the experienced reader who can be “trust[ed]” by the adult author to navigate this uncertainty successfully. Unlike their peers, readers of novels high in uncertainty are considered capable of independently navigating “complex and indeterminate books” that do not guarantee the reader a sense of security. In the context of my aforementioned world and work contexts, I wondered if readers of these books could be more adept at evaluating the truthfulness of information online and accepting uncertainty if no verified information is accessible to them rather than possibly relying on misinformation out of a need to “feel secure.” However, it occurred to me that books with, for example, many untrustworthy or morally grey characters could also contribute to distrust in authority figures, a powerful contributor to the spread of misinformation.
I had also observed a second view that aligned with the more traditional and deliberate didactic nature of literature for children and teens, which I characterized as a modeling approach, demonstrating successful information evaluation. The use of fiction to model ideal social views, forms of morality, and other norms is well-documented in studies of children’s literature; more recently, teen dystopian fiction has been noted for modeling activist practices to readers. Therefore, I speculated that it was possible that books explicitly demonstrating the pursuit of facts and truth to achieve certainty and justice may influence readers to be more capable at assessing the reliability of a source or proactive in verifying information they encounter online. These qualities are common to the crime and mystery genres in particular, which had seen such an increase in popularity at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I was also mindful that such books could be attractive for their neat resolutions, and that these books may disadvantage readers by urging them to seek out certainty and security with real-world events, even if it meant believing misinformation. It is for this reason of needing comfort and assurance that individuals with low self-confidence, and greater anxiety and feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness, are more likely to believe misinformation and conspiracy theories.

These speculations and circumstances coalesced into the novel project discussed in this article upon one final discovery: a study that found that teens who studied elective subjects in the creative arts were more skilled at identifying when information was credible or not than their peers who chose electives in “hard sciences,” even when the misinformation pertained to scientific topics like climate change. This finding, revealing a link between the arts and information literacy, should not have been such a surprise: integration of the arts into school education has been found to have considerable personal and educational benefits, including for the study of science. But information literacy education, such as what I have reviewed above, has a considerable emphasis on “hard sciences” approaches; in particular, the process of fact-checking. More concerning, research has found that individuals with a stronger trust in “science” are more easily duped into believing misinformation that merely appears scientific in form, compared to individuals who are more skeptical and apply their critical thinking skills to all information. This is not to say that education in fact-checking serves no value—rather, I began to question what the arts could offer.
As my specialty area throughout my doctoral studies had been teens’ reading practices, literature was my ideal candidate. Mystery fiction in particular seemed perfect for the task: protagonists frequently encounter unverified information or misinformation and sources (in the forms of characters, documents, and more) of varying levels of trustworthiness. In their pursuit of the truth, characters must seek out and evaluate all the evidence available to them, whatever form it takes. To keep the project to a feasible scale, I selected two widely available series popular with teens, which I had read in their entirety: Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events and Robin Stevens’ Murder Most Unladylike series (alternate title Wells & Wong Mysteries; henceforth, Murder Most Unladylike).

I determined that Snicket’s series closely matched the first view of reading uncertain fiction as skills-based, as the books contain morally ambiguous characters and institutions and high levels of uncertainty regarding the plot. I determined that Stevens’ series in contrast was closer to the second view of modeling information literacy, as it features resolved plotlines and characters who ultimately seek to uphold a strong commitment to justice through identifying the truth. Through this study, which has engaged with fans of both book series, I aimed to determine if these books fostered teens’ truth-seeking skills, through either explicit modeling of pursuing truth, or narrative ambiguity that invites reader reflection, that could indirectly nurture the development of readers’ information literacy.

**Research Questions**

The three research questions to guide the project and analysis of findings were:

1. How do truth-seeking novels support the development of information literacy and misinformation resilience?
2. Do books demonstrating protagonists achieving justice and certainty or books with high levels of narrative uncertainty (e.g., unreliable narrators, ambiguous endings) better support developing these skills?
3. How can these books be integrated into leisure-oriented library programs to indirectly nurture the growth of teens’ digital literacy, within and beyond the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic?
Additionally, the three research objectives to measure project success were:

1. To identify if and how the reading of truth-seeking novels that focus heavily on concepts of trustworthiness and factual accuracy affects readers’ response to unverified or incorrect information shared online. Corresponds with research questions 1 and 2 and is met by completion of project.

2. To develop resources for libraries to use fiction to indirectly support the development of skills to think critically about misinformation online (or do so in conjunction with existing initiatives) in informal, interest-driven learning environments. Corresponds with research question 3 and is met by the creation and dissemination of resources.

3. To contribute to scholarly and public discussions about teens’ information literacy and reading with data that centers and elevates teens’ voices. Corresponds with all research questions and is met by dissemination of project findings in academic journal articles.

Methods

Data collection involved an international survey of teen readers of either Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* or Robin Stevens’ *Murder Most Unladylike* series. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee (H-REC), reference number ETH21-5922. Survey participants were teens aged 12 to 18 years old (inclusive) living anywhere in the world. To participate, participants needed to have read at least one book from one of the two aforementioned series. The survey was hosted on the platform Qualtrics, and survey questions are attached in appendix 1. The survey was divided into three parts, totaling approximately 20 minutes: the first asked for basic, non-identifiable information about participants to enable the analysis, the second asked about their experiences with unverified information or misinformation online, and the third asked about participants’ experiences with the book series they had read, with questions varying slightly based on the series they had read.

Data was analyzed with a mixed-methods approach. As the open-ended, reflective questions were the heart of the study, they were coded through a grounded theory approach in Microsoft Excel. This approach allows the findings to be generated through the trends that emerge in participants’ responses rather than any assumptions of the researcher. A total of 119 responses were collected, with 52 submitted by readers of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and 34...
submitted by fans of Murder Most Unladylike. A further 33 participants did not complete enough of the survey for the data to be useable. As it was an anonymous survey, all data was de-identified upon its arrival to the researcher.

After completing the survey, participants were invited to nominate a nonprofit organization that works with teens and literature from a list of five pre-selected options. The nonprofit with the highest number of votes would receive a donation of $200USD funded by the project grant. Information about each nonprofit was provided, with a link to their website. It was anticipated that this ability to contribute to public good in a meaningful way would encourage participation in the project and provide an opportunity for teens to feel empowered and engaged with their world. The organization with the most votes was the Lambda Literary Foundation, and the donation was made on December 20, 2021.

Findings

I first provide an overview of the characteristics of each readership, before exploring the six themes that emerged from the inductive thematic coding of the survey data, to support the grounded theory analysis. Five of the themes were present in both the categories of online misinformation practices and responses to their chosen book series. These themes included teens’ considerations of evidence, the motive of an individual content poster or fictional character, and considerations of the broader context and perspective of the events described. Additionally, there were the themes of teens’ trust in an authority figure and personal bias toward or against a particular issue or individual. A sixth theme emerged only in the analysis of responses to fiction texts, which was considerations of youth rights and safety.

I discuss each theme in detail below, including how they were identified during the coding process and examples from survey responses. In particular, I explore the extent to which each theme was represented within each group of readers, as well as in relation to the misinformation practices as described by respondents. In each section, the first quote is always by a reader of Lemony Snicket, and the second is by a reader of Robin Stevens.
1. Characteristics of the Two Readships

The demographic characteristics and misinformation and reading practices of the participants from Lemony Snicket’s readership and Robin Stevens’ readership provide insights into the interpretation of the data, and the basis for findings that have emerged.

Table 1. Age of participants by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of participants</th>
<th>Total age of ASOUE readers</th>
<th>% of ASOUE readers</th>
<th>Total age of MMU readers</th>
<th>% of MMU readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19.23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.46</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.38</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43.70</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Gender of participants by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of participants</th>
<th>Total ASOUE readers by gender</th>
<th>% ASOUE readers by gender</th>
<th>Total MMU readers by gender</th>
<th>% MMU readers by gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53.85</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>73.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (written-in answer)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1 (agender)</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1 illustrates, both readerships were roughly equal in age, with the distribution of participants’ ages only diverging in the case of ages 15 and 18, which resulted in A Series of Unfortunate Events having a slightly older readership overall compared to Murder Most Unladylike. This may be explained by Snicket’s series being published during the 2000s, while Stevens’ has been published throughout the 2010s. As table 2 shows, the survey responses were female-dominated for both readerships, however male and non-binary respondents were represented notably higher among readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events. These results should not be taken as indicative of the entire readerships of these two series.
Participants were asked whether they undertook fact-checking or similar processes when they encountered possible misinformation online; as well as whether they had engaged in any further reading or discussion about the fiction books they read to better understand them. Both represent a kind of “further research” into either online information or fictional information (from the books), and the interest was in whether there was any relationship between the two. As the results in table 3 indicate, readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events engaged in further research into both misinformation and fiction at a higher rate overall than readers of Murder Most Unladylike; however, a notable percentage of both readerships engaged in fact-checking possible misinformation online. Interestingly, in both readerships, there is an approximately 20% increase in further research from the fiction context to the misinformation context, which suggests that the more a readership engages in further research of a book, the more members of the readership may be inclined to fact-check misinformation online. Further research would be needed to substantiate this. Nonetheless, it is an intriguing trend in the aggregate data for these two readerships.

Table 3. Engagement in further research by participants by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Further research</th>
<th>Misinformation (no.)</th>
<th>Misinformation (%)</th>
<th>Fiction (no.)</th>
<th>Fiction (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASOUE readers</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>63.46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMU readers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44.12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At an individual level, the total of readers who engaged in further research for both misinformation and their respective fiction series was 30 participants. Of this, 23 were readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events (44.23% of the readership), and 7 were Murder Most Unladylike readers (20.59% of the readership). Building on the above question of whether further research into fiction is associated with further research into online misinformation, table 4 displays the frequency with which these 30 participants who engaged in both forms of further research fact-checked information online. As can be seen, readers predominantly fact-checked information “always” or “sometimes;” and these percentages of each readership were higher among Snicket’s readers.
Table 4. Frequency of fact-checking by participants who did further research into misinformation and fiction, by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of fact-checking online information</th>
<th>Both forms of further research—ASOUE readers</th>
<th>% of ASOUE readership</th>
<th>Both forms of further research—MMU readers</th>
<th>% of MMU readership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes always</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes sometimes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.85</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only occasionally</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total readers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44.23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supplementing the above data is the frequency with which the nine readers who did not conduct further research on their chosen book series engaged in fact-checking of potential online misinformation. This is presented below in table 5. As can be seen, while these fact-checking frequencies are comparable across readerships, they are a stark contrast to the findings in table 4, particularly in the case of two Murder Most Unladylike readers stating they never fact-checked information online. When taken together, the data in both table 4 and table 5 suggests that an individual undertaking further research into their chosen book series may be more likely to fact-check information online.

Table 5. Frequency of fact-checking by participants who did not do further research into fiction, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of fact-checking online information</th>
<th>No further research of book—ASOUE readers</th>
<th>% of ASOUE readership</th>
<th>No further research of book—MMU readers</th>
<th>% of MMU readership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes sometimes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Occasionally</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, never</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total readers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At both a group level (table 3), and an individual level (tables 4 and 5), the data indicates that a higher engagement with further research in relation to a book series correlates with a higher frequency of fact-checking of information online. Furthermore, this data reveals at both a group and individual level that readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events were more likely to engage in both forms of further research than Murder Most Unladylike. While these conclusions have some limitations, such as relying on self-reported data, and the slightly younger age of Stevens’ readership represented in this study, they nonetheless indicate a fascinating trend in the
relationship between uncertain and certain forms of mystery fiction, and teens’ online misinformation practices, which may form the basis of future research.

Teens were asked about the importance of knowing the truth about online information, as well as whether they preferred clear or ambiguous endings to a book, or whether they liked both. The latter was of interest, as it could indicate reader’s views on how important it was to “know the truth” in the mystery fiction context. Table 6 provides the results on how readers ranked the importance of knowing the truth of online misinformation, and table 7 presents readers’ responses regarding the type of endings they preferred.

Table 6. Evaluation of the importance of knowing the truth about online information by participants by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of knowing the truth about news/information</th>
<th>Total ASOUE readers</th>
<th>Total % ASOUE readers</th>
<th>Total MMU readers</th>
<th>Total % MMU readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19.23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite Important</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36.54</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36.54</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Preference in book ending among participants by book series, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference in book endings</th>
<th>Total ASOUE readers</th>
<th>Total % ASOUE readers</th>
<th>Total MMU readers</th>
<th>Total % MMU readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38.46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>48.08</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>64.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events considered knowing the truth about online information to be either “extremely” or “quite” important. However, in the fiction context, they appreciated both clear and unclear endings, demonstrating a high level of comfort with ambiguity in fictional narratives. This may suggest that fiction is an area where readers feel they can relax and embrace ambiguity, which they may be reluctant to do with real-world information. In contrast, Stevens’ readers demonstrated a stronger preference for certainty in
fictional narratives, but in the context of online misinformation, they indicated a slightly reduced desire to know the truth. These patterns are intriguing, and would require further research, particularly with regard to Stevens’ readers and the possible role age may play in such results.

Lastly, in tables 8 and 9, I compare readers’ evaluations of the importance of knowing the truth about online news and information with the number of books they had read in their chosen series.

Table 8. Evaluation of the importance of knowing the truth about online information and number of books read, among Snicket’s readers, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books read in ASOUE</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Quite important</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Importance NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of them (34 readers)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most books in the series (7 readers)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one (10 readers)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just the first (1 reader)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of ASOUE readers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Evaluation of the importance of knowing the truth about online information and number of books read, among Stevens’ readers, in total numbers and percentage of that readership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books read in MMU</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Quite important</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Importance NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of them (24 readers)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most books in the series (6 readers)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one (3 readers)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just the first (1 reader)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of MMU readers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What makes this comparison intriguing is that, based on these numbers, readers’ evaluation of the importance of knowing the truth about online information appears to increase based on the number of books they have read. While these findings are admittedly limited due to their small sample size, they once again provide insight into an intriguing trend that can form the basis of future research.
2. Analysis of Teen Survey Data by Theme

Evidence was a theme more highly represented among Lemony Snicket’s readership in their misinformation practices, and to a lesser but still significant extent, their reading practices. The theme of evidence was identified in the misinformation context through teens’ references to data and evidence in online posts or news items, as well as their considerations about the credibility of news sources they encountered online. For example, some readers’ examples of what made them confident about information credibility were:

- Has lots of facts. Has links to trustworthy websites. Has expert’s opinions, views, studies. (Australian, 12)
- Having sources that are trustworthy, and also talking about the other point of view. (England, 16)

In the fiction context, evidence was coded based on whether readers gave evidence for their evaluations of characters’ actions, such as citing specific events from the series, rather than simply expressing their like or dislike for them. For example:

- [Count Olaf was untrustworthy because] In The Penultimate Peril, he was so ready to harm Esmé and the man and woman with the medusoid mycelium. Also, he let his comrades die and did not care numerous times throughout the series. (United States, 14)
- ‘[About Lucy Mountfitchet] She has at least three different names-she’s clearly not always honest!’ (England, 12)

Teens overall were more attentive to evidence in their evaluation of news and online information, with 44% of Snicket readers and 15% of Stevens readers referencing considerations of sources and proof in their responses. In contrast, evidence was only provided to support readers’ views of fictional characters and events by 27% of Snicket readers and 9% of Stevens readers. This suggests that the teen respondents had a more relaxed approach to justifying their opinions when the material was clearly fictional.

Motive was more highly represented among Lemony Snicket’s readership, in their misinformation practices, and to a lesser extent, their reading practices. Surprisingly, fans of Stevens’ work demonstrated the same trend in reverse, considering the motives of fictional individuals more than those of people involved in the production or sharing of news or online information. The theme of motive was identified in the misinformation context through teens’
questioning of who had posted content and why they would advocate for a certain perspective, including what the potential gain could be. For example:

What are the sources for this info/evidence?, Are they credible?, Are they pushing a particular agenda/worldview? (England, 16)

‘I wonder who has written it and if they have a reason to write those things, if they have motives, and what other people have said about the same thing’ (England, 16)

In the fiction context, motive was identified based on whether readers identified a character’s motivations for their actions, such as noting a character’s job or their overarching goals—whether it be for committing a crime, or everyday actions. For example:

‘I consider Justice Strauss to be mostly trustworthy; she is a justice, after all, and is committed to finding the truth. She is also very well-intentioned. However, she can be and has been deceived. For example, Olaf played to her ego and almost got her to marry him and Violet (perform the marriage, not polygamy).’ (United States, 16)

‘[About Inspector Priestley] He wanted to do the right thing and tried to understand things from all perspectives’ (Scotland, 14)

Teen readers of Snicket’s books considered motive in relation to both online information (37% of readers) and in the fictional context (25%) at a higher rate, with more consideration of an individual’s motivations in the online information context. However, Stevens’ readers gave less consideration to motive in relation to online misinformation (9%), and more attention to motive in discussing the actions of fictional characters (21%). This is an intriguing divergence which could provide the grounds for further research.

*Context and perspective* was the most highly represented theme across the two categories of misinformation practices and responses to fiction, as well as the two readerships. This theme was identified in the misinformation context through statements by teens in which they considered the broader context in which information or a post was presented, as well as how events are framed or spread online. As some readers stated:

Something that makes it feel trustworthy or untrustworthy is the site it comes from (which way the specific source leans politically), what other sources say about the same topic or event, and who wrote the article or information online (United States, 16)
i dont think that information online can be very trustworthy, because things on
the internet can spread easily and lots of people dont fact check statements
(Hong Kong/England, 12)

In the fiction context, the theme of context and perspective was similarly identified if
readers provided broader context or perspectives on the book’s events, such as how characters
and their actions were framed within the narrative. For example:

[About Mr. Poe] He may mean well, but he was negligent and incompetent in his
duties to the Baudaire children. He found all of his information through his wife,
who leads a newspaper that has been stated and shown to be very untrustworthy
throughout the entire book (United States, 16)

[About Lucy Mountfitchet] She is very honest and frank with the girls, often to
the point of being blunt, and once she is able to tell them the truth, she always
does. Even while in disguise as Miss Alston, she tried to tell them as much as
possible. (England, 16)

Readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events considered the context and perspective of
online information and fiction at the same rate (58%), demonstrating a strong awareness of how
events in real and fictional worlds are always situated in their respective contexts. However,
there was a surprising divergence, in the trend of themes being represented more in the fiction
context, among the readers of Murder Most Unladylike. The theme of context and perspective
was represented in 53% of these survey responses in the online information context, but only
26% in the fiction context. This difference could be attributed to either the sample itself, or it
could be a result of the series’ world-building, which features far more certainty in its plot
resolutions.

Trust in certain authorities or figures was represented with a similar frequency across
both groups of readers in the categories of misinformation practices and the responses to fiction.
In the misinformation context, the theme of trust in a certain authority figure was identified
through teens’ expressions of trust in a specific source, including an influencer, a news company,
or another perceived authority. For example, online information was more trustworthy when
distributed by sources with markers of authority, as some participants expressed:

when the accounts are verified news sources im likely to trust it (England, 18)

If its by a website I can trust (government edu, that sort of stuff ) (Australia, 16)
In the fiction context, the theme of trust in a specific figure included individual characters or the profession they worked in. For example:

[About Justice Strauss] She was a judge, which requires a good ability to judge character and a strong moral code (England, 16)

I consider Inspector Priestley to be trustworthy because he is an inspector, and is trying to help and solve the case. (Australia, 13)

Teen readers of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* expressed trust in both the online information context (33% of readers) and in the fictional context (13%), with notably more expressions of trust in the real world than in Snicket’s morally grey and highly uncertain fictional world. Readers of *Murder Most Unladylike* had comparable levels of trust in particular sources in the online misinformation context (29%) and less in Stevens’ fictional characters (12%). For both groups of readers, it appeared that having trust in a specific source, individual, or authority was more easily accomplished in our real world—a finding that is perhaps understandable given that both book series are in the mystery genre, in which a large proportion of the cast will likely be under suspicion at some point in time.

*Personal bias* emerged as a theme in comments in which teens expressed bias for or against something or someone. It was represented with a similar frequency across both reader groups in the categories of misinformation practices and responses to fiction. Personal bias was identified in the misinformation context through teens’ references to believing in certain reporters or sources because of past experience with them, or even openly admitting that they were biased in some ways. For example, as some readers stated:

I feel confident [about identifying the accuracy of information] because I mostly only follow the creators, or websites that have proven to be accurate before. If I do feel unconfident, then i wait a few weeks. If no official news is revealed, I don’t believe it. (United States, 15)

[I trust a source] if it has a good reputation (England, 14)

In the fiction context, personal bias was coded based on whether readers expressed a strong bias for or against a certain character, profession, or other attribute *without* offering evidence for their particular like or dislike. For example:

[About not trusting Mr. Poe] He was simply an idiot (Canada, 18)
[About Uncle Felix] He was a likeable character but did seem quite suspicious at times (Scotland, 14)

In the context of news and online information, readers of Snicket’s novels (10%) demonstrated a slightly higher level of personal bias in their evaluation of sources or individuals, compared to Stevens’ readership (6%). In contrast, Stevens’ readers had slightly higher levels of personal bias in their fiction reading (26%) compared to Snicket’s readership (21%). In both cases, personal bias was higher in the context of fiction reading, suggesting that teens were more active in addressing bias when it came to real world news and events, compared to the comparably risk-free environment of fiction.  

Youth rights and safety was the final theme, identified solely in response to fiction. Despite not being present in the category of misinformation practices, this theme was nonetheless intriguing, considering the increasingly high profile given to teen political activists in the last decade, such as Malala Yousafzai (girls’ rights and education) and Greta Thunberg (climate change). Their role in promoting these issues may influence teens’ perceptions of these issues, which is an issue that may be explored in future research. The theme of youth rights and safety was coded based on whether readers highlighted matters such as the importance of adults protecting children from danger or respecting and listening to the young protagonists. For example:

[About Justice Strauss] As the opposite with Count Olaf, she was naturally motherly towards the Baudelaires. (United States, 15)

[About Uncle Felix] Because he seemed nice and treated the girls as his equal (Australia, 15)

It is important to note that teens did not advocate for adults to take charge of situations to shield the protagonists from harm—rather, such adult attempts to disempower the protagonists for their own safety were criticized. This critical response to child protectionist approaches was clearly distinguished from genuine adult care for the wellbeing and empowerment of teens. This finding provides grounds for future research in the context of online misinformation, and the role that teen activists or influencers may have on teens who may feel their voices go unheard by adult politicians or other leaders.
Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate intriguing links between teens’ online misinformation practices and their responses to reading mystery fiction. While this study has some limitations, such as the survey format not allowing for follow-up questions to participants’ responses, it has allowed for a wider range of responses to be collected from around the world, which would not have been possible if the project used an interview format. As a result, some tentative conclusions may be drawn from the data discussed above to provide a foundation on which future research may be conducted. In the following two sections, I discuss the conclusions drawn from this data as well as how the data informed the development of the project’s activity outputs.

1. Discussion of Data in Relation to Research Questions

Conclusion 1: A more interrogative approach to mystery fiction books (via further research into the books) by individual teens correlated with even stronger information literacy practices in relation to real-world information. Individual readers of both A Series of Unfortunate Events and Murder Most Unladylike were more likely to engage in fact-checking of online misinformation if they had conducted further research into the fiction books they read. This does not necessarily imply direct causation, and further research would be needed to determine the extent to which the books may have imparted this influence on readers.

Conclusion 2: A higher frequency of research about a book series among its reader community correlated with a greater willingness to further research real news among that reader community. At a group level, readers of A Series of Unfortunate Events were more likely to engage in further research into the fiction books they read and engage in fact-checking of online misinformation. Perhaps more intriguingly, both readerships shared the same margin of an approximately 20% increase in a willingness to conduct further research if it was information in the online space. This may indicate that it is not just books, but perhaps fan-community practices that influence teens’ willingness to further interrogate information—again, providing grounds for further research.

Conclusion 3: Readers of uncertain fiction (A Series of Unfortunate Events) were more willing to embrace uncertainty within fiction but expressed a greater need to know the truth regarding real-life information and events. Readers of certain fiction (Murder Most Unladylike) preferred
certainty in fiction and expressed a reduced desire to know the truth about real-life information and events. Snicket’s readers enjoyed both clear and unclear endings but had a strong need to know the truth in the context of online misinformation. In contrast, Stevens’ readers demonstrated a stronger preference for certainty in fictional narratives but had a slightly reduced desire to know the truth about online information. This suggests that while teens in general considered knowing the truth to be “quite important,” those who preferred novels in which information and resolution was deliberately withheld from them had a stronger need to know the truth in the real-world context where the stakes of ignorance are higher.

Conclusion 4: When evaluating both online misinformation and fiction books, teens considered the same four main factors (evidence, motive for actions, whether they can trust a source, and context and perspective of events) but sometimes displayed bias for or against sources and individuals. Additionally, the treatment of children and teens was crucial to their perception of individuals within the fiction context.

In both readerships, in 15 out of 16 instances across the online and fictional contexts, a higher percentage of the readership that had these themes represented in responses within the fictional context correlated with an even higher concentration of readers who considered these factors in the context of real-life misinformation. In other words, the more a readership considered one of these themes within the context of a book, the more likely they were to consider it when evaluating online misinformation. Youth rights and safety was not observed in the misinformation context but was still a substantial trend. What is perhaps most fascinating about the four main factors teens considered is the extent to which they correspond with both critical thinking skills in general and misinformation education resources in particular: many of the activities I reviewed, such as how to fact-check information, instructed teens to evaluate the evidence in a claim online, question the motivations of online content, verify sources, and consider the various contexts and perspectives at play. Whether teens learned or enhanced these skills through reading these books is a matter to be explored in future research.

Drawing together the above conclusions, the data collected in this study suggests that readers of uncertain fiction (A Series of Unfortunate Events) consider evidence, motive, trust, and context and perspective at a higher frequency in both fictional and online misinformation contexts; are more pro-active at an individual and group level when it comes to conducting
further research on both their fiction reading and evaluation of unverified information online; and despite enjoying ambiguity in the fiction context, feel a stronger desire to pursue truth when confronted with potential misinformation in the online space. Thus, I tentatively conclude that books with high levels of narrative uncertainty may better support teens’ developing information literacy skills. This provides a basis on which future research could be conducted to understand how the books may influence these practices.

2. Discussion of Resource Development and Links to Project Themes

In this section, I provide an overview of the development of the educational resources, which were based on research, project findings, and collaboration with the project’s paid librarian consultant. Prior to developing the resources, I conducted a review of existing activities that could support information literacy education, summarized in the literature review above. This included reading the published lesson plans, activities and infographics, watching videos, and playing the games while noting common trends in the resources. During this stage, I observed a strong focus on teaching the processes of fact-checking as well as activities like creating checklists of indications that information may be untrue.46 I found some educational resources encourage children or teens to view themselves as an information detective when it came to fact-checking, and that publisher-created activities for readers of both series also at times invited readers to view themselves as detectives or to analyze documents for suspicious errors or secret codes.47 Such publisher activities are unsurprising given the themes of secret organizations and detective work in both Snicket and Stevens’ work; however, the similarity to information literacy education resources were unanticipated and an exciting discovery.

I also reviewed a range of teaching resources for the two featured book series, as well as a broader sample from the Australian databases, the AustLit Database and Reading Australia.48 As the other resources I had reviewed were predominantly non-Australian, and as I would be working with an Australian librarian, it was important to ensure there were some Australian approaches to teaching resources included. The resources produced by such educational databases were more clearly structured, but as they were designed to be classroom assessments, they were not suitable for use outside this context.49

One decision I made regarding these resources was that they would not incorporate examples of misinformation that directly related to real-world issues, as some existing resources
do. As the structure for this project is guided by the 2017–2021 YALSA research Priority Area 1, it was essential that the resources’ educational aspect would be a passive learning experience, with the primary focus being on enjoyable activities related to beloved book series. For this reason, some resources are designed specifically for readers of either A Series of Unfortunate Events or Murder Most Unladylike, making them ideal for library book clubs or social reading groups. Others do not require teens to have read either book series, allowing them to be used for a broader range of settings.

The resources benefitted from several rounds of feedback from Australian librarian Rebecca Dale, who was paid $300USD for her contributions to the project as stated in the budget and who agreed in writing to be named in publications from this project. Dale, an ALIA-accredited librarian currently working in the university library at UTS, also has experience working with youth programming in Australian public libraries. Due to her experience with both youth programming and in the educational space as an academic librarian, Dale was an ideal candidate, and provided several rounds of feedback on the resources for their clarity, their suitability for teens and library contexts, and their consistency with other youth public library programming in Australia.

Dale also highlighted the difference in training levels for librarians in Australia, compared to international counterparts, as only a diploma is required for ALIA accreditation in some roles. As this may lead to some local librarians being less equipped to run these activities, she recommended preparing an additional document with some basic suggestions for facilitating group discussions and activities to support librarians who may not have experience in this area. The ideas in this document (appendix 3) come from Dale’s own suggestions, and my own experience of running a book discussion group with teens for five years in my role as a bookseller.

Furthermore, Dale strongly advocated for worksheets to accompany some of the activities, to provide more structure to the activities, particularly for younger teens. I was initially reluctant to create these, out of concern that they would make the activities appear too similar to school work. However, Dale felt these would be a valuable asset for time-poor library staff when planning any programs, as well as a means for both librarians and teens to feel more comfortable in participating in the activities in a self-directed way. The resources, worksheets, and additional support are attached in the appendices.

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Each of the eight activities that were crafted based on the data from this study was built around a combination of three of the six themes that arose from the data. I summarize each activity and identify the themes that informed it below:

Activity One—The Auction. This activity was based on the themes of evidence, motive, and personal bias, and involves teens creating detailed, false histories for everyday items they aim to sell in an imagined auction for the highest price. It is inspired by a scene in book 6 of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* in which the protagonists participate in an auction, as well as survey responses that referenced the villain’s greed for money, but this activity has no direct relationship to the books. It provides an opportunity for teens to role play, engage in creative writing, and listen closely for the chance to catch out another player for inconsistencies in their item’s history.

Activity 2—The Screen Campaign. This activity was based on the themes of personal bias, youth rights and safety, and motive, and it invites players to examine bias in pre-written statements related to an imagined proposed law before writing their own statement. The topic for this proposed law was the banning of screen devices (computers or phones) for those 18 and under, which was chosen because teen players would likely feel strongly about it. The inspiration for this activity came from reviewing the website of the Australian government’s Office of the eSafety Commissioner to identify any resources on information literacy education and instead discovering that “overuse” of screen devices is considered a bigger concern for teens’ wellbeing.53

Activity 3—Mr. Poe On Trial. This activity was based on the themes of context and perspective, youth rights and safety, and personal bias, and it invites teens to consider the actions of Mr. Poe from *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and determine whether he is guilty or innocent of allowing the protagonists to come to harm. The topic of this activity came from teens’ divisive survey responses to Mr. Poe, while the activity format is influenced by the structure of high school debates.

Activity 4—Inspector Priestly Discussion. This activity was based on the themes of trust, context and perspective, and youth rights and safety, and invites teens to consider what their expectations are of authority figures. The topic of this activity came from teens’ divisive responses to Inspector Priestly in *Murder Most Unladylike*, who was either strongly trusted or distrusted by teens. The activity format of open discussion was influenced by
the prevalence of group discussion activities among teachers’ resources, such as on Reading Australia and the AustLit Database.

Activity 5—The Daily Punctilio Fact-Check. This activity was based on the themes of evidence, trust, and context and perspective, and gives players the opportunity to fact-check a misleading newspaper article unrelated to world events. It uses the news articles from the newspaper The Daily Punctilio, featured in A Series of Unfortunate Events, which regularly prints absurdly incorrect statements. The format of this activity came from teens’ own descriptions of how they fact-checked news and online information in their daily lives, while the choice to use articles from The Daily Punctilio printed in Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography came from my own preference against using real-world examples for information literacy activities (discussed further below).

Activity 6—Murder Most Unladylike News Article. This activity was based on the themes of motive, evidence, and context and perspective, and it provides teens with an opportunity to create their own news article based on events in the book series, while considering some of the limitations faced by journalists. The format of this activity was influenced by other creative writing exercises featured in publishers’ teaching resources.54

Activity 7—A Word Which Here Means…. This activity was based on the themes of personal bias, motive, and context and perspective. It aims to give players an opportunity to think about why certain words are used in particular contexts and how word choice can influence an overall message. It is inspired in part by A Series of Unfortunate Events, as Lemony Snicket often gives highly biased definitions of words; however, this activity does not involve the books directly. It is also inspired by teens’ responses to the survey regarding their misinformation practices, in particular responses that indicated some teens paid close attention to word choice in information to determine its validity.

Activity 8—Build-A-Reader. This activity was based on the themes of personal bias, context and perspective, and motive, and it aims to help players to think about how information and products target certain ideal audiences or consumers through features like language and images. It involves the use of the Murder Most Unladylike books; however, players do not need to read the books—rather, this activity could be good to complete prior to reading them. This activity was influenced by the prevalence of infographics and videos that were provided in information literacy education resources, leading to a high

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emphasis on visual content, as well as some resources that referenced teaching awareness of online advertising.55

In her final review of the resources, Dale stated that all her feedback had been addressed through my revisions and expressed enthusiasm about the resources becoming available for use.

Conclusion

This study has found numerous connections between the reading of mystery fiction and information literacy and misinformation practices. In discovering that reading mystery fiction, which provides a reader with skills to navigate uncertainty rather than security to alleviate uncertainty, may be a greater support to teens’ online misinformation practices, it has forged a connection between existing research from the fields of literary studies and the study of misinformation practices. Among the limitations to the findings of this project are the small sample size and the inability to determine the extent to which reader preference and pre-existing information literacy education influenced teens’ responses. However, these findings provide fertile grounds for future research that I am eager to undertake.

This project’s novel design arose from an unexpected combination of circumstances, many of which were triggered by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, the need for more engaging and empowering information literacy education for teens predates this. Therefore, rather than advocate for an increase in traditional approaches that were not adequately addressing this issue, this project has embraced our unprecedented times as an opportunity for discovery, as have many librarians, educators, and practitioners.56 The general public has done this too: as an ALIA press release published on May 18, 2021, stated, when I was already several months into this project, “Bookworms turn to mystery and thriller novels throughout COVID-19.”57 As I had observed the year before, many of us sought more, not fewer mysteries in times of uncertainty.

In addition to the contribution this study makes to scholarship, this study has produced other benefits. First and foremost are the resources, which I encourage facilitators to adapt as needed for their clients; and I welcome feedback via email from librarians or others who may use or participate in these activities. Additionally, the teen participants in this study have contributed to public good in the wider world through their selection of the Lambda Literary Foundation as the charity to receive the $200USD donation. It is my hope that this outcome has also helped the

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participants to feel empowered in their own abilities to make change in their world through sharing their voices.

Misinformation poses an ongoing threat not just to social cohesion, but to the health and wellbeing of all members of society in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Without disregarding the value of science-based approaches like fact-checking, this project has explored the potential of literature, and the world of the arts, to play a role in this challenge.

Acknowledgements

Emily Booth thanks her doctoral supervisor Dr. Bhuva Narayan.
Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. What is your age? (Choose from box)
   - 12
   - 13
   - 14
   - 15
   - 16
   - 17
   - 18

2. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Non-binary
   - Other (Please write in answer)
     __________________________________________
   - Prefer not to say

3. What country do you live in? (Write in answer)

4. Which series have you read books from? (Choose from box)
   - *Murder Most Unladylike* (also called the *Wells & Wong Mysteries*)
     by Robin Stevens
   - *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket

5. How many novels in this series have you read? (Choose from box)
   - Just the first book in the series
   - More than one book, but less than five books
   - Most of the books in the series
   - All the books in the series

6. What platforms online do you get most of your news and new information from? Choose all that apply.
   - Twitter
   - Facebook
7. After reading, watching, or listening to a new piece of news or information online, do you think about whether it is false or true?
   - Yes
   - No

8. (Display This Question: If 7 = Yes) What questions do you think about or ask yourself about the news or information after you have read it?

9. How confident are you that you can identify when information online is unverified (e.g., rumors) or false?
   - I am very confident that I can do this
   - I am usually confident that I can do this
   - I am rarely confident that I can do this
   - I am never confident that I can do this

10. What makes you feel confident/unconfident about being able to identify if something you read is misinformation or unverified information?

11. What makes information that you see online feel trustworthy/true, or not trustworthy, to you?

12. Do you fact check news or other information after you read it online?
   - Yes, always
   - Yes, sometimes
   - Only occasionally
   - No, never
13. *(Display This Question: If 12 = Yes, Always; Yes, Sometimes; Only Occasionally)* How do you do this?
   - Talk to someone, like a friend or a parent
   - Read the information again and think about if it seems true
   - Look up more information online, e.g., news articles
   - Something else (write here) ____________________________________________

14. *(Display This Question: If 12 = No)* Why don’t you do this?

_________________________________________________________________________

15. Have you ever accepted unsatisfactory or not detailed/correct enough information or explanations about something because it was easier than researching the topic?
   - Yes
   - No

16. How important is it for you to know if the news or information you read online is true and factually accurate?
   - Extremely important—I need to know the truth
   - Quite important—I prefer to know the truth
   - Not very important—I don’t really mind if I don’t know the truth
   - Extremely unimportant—I am comfortable not knowing the truth

17. How trustworthy did you consider the character of (Inspector Priestley OR Count Olaf) to be?
   - Very trustworthy
   - Somewhat trustworthy
   - Not very trustworthy
   - Very untrustworthy

18. Why did you consider (Inspector Priestley OR Count Olaf) to be trustworthy or not?

_________________________________________________________________________

19. Did you feel you knew enough about (Inspector Priestley OR Count Olaf) and the things he said for you to decide when he was telling the truth or lying?
   - Yes
   - No
20. (Display This Question: If 19 = Yes) What other things in the book helped you to decide if (Inspector Priestley OR Count Olaf) was telling the truth?

______________________________________________________________________________

21. (Display This Question: If 19 = No) How did you feel about not having enough information? (e.g., frustrated, satisfied, curious)

______________________________________________________________________________

22. How trustworthy did you consider the character of (Uncle Felix OR Mr. Poe) to be?
   - Very trustworthy
   - Somewhat trustworthy
   - Not very trustworthy
   - Very untrustworthy

23. Why did you consider (Uncle Felix OR Mr. Poe) to be trustworthy or not?

______________________________________________________________________________

24. Did you feel you knew enough about (Uncle Felix OR Mr. Poe) and the things he said for you to decide when he was telling the truth or lying?
   - Yes
   - No

25. (Display This Question: If 24 = Yes) What other things in the book helped you to decide if (Uncle Felix OR Mr. Poe) was telling the truth?

______________________________________________________________________________

26. (Display This Question: If 24 = No) How did you feel about not having enough information? (e.g., frustrated, satisfied, curious)

______________________________________________________________________________

27. How trustworthy did you consider the character of (Miss Alston/Lucy Mountfitchet OR Justice Strauss) to be?
   - Very trustworthy
   - Somewhat trustworthy
   - Not very trustworthy
   - Very untrustworthy
28. Why did you consider (Miss Alston/Lucy Mountfitchet OR Justice Strauss) to be trustworthy or not?

29. Did you feel you knew enough about (Miss Alston/Lucy Mountfitchet OR Justice Strauss) and the things she said for you to decide when she was telling the truth or lying?
   - Yes
   - No

30. (Display This Question: If 29 = Yes) What other things in the book helped you to decide if (Miss Alston/Lucy Mountfitchet OR Justice Strauss) was telling the truth?

31. (Display This Question: If 29 = No) How did you feel about not having enough information? (e.g., frustrated, satisfied, curious)

32. Do you think that the main characters did the right thing by trying to solve the mysteries in the books?
   - Definitely yes
   - Probably yes
   - Probably not
   - Definitely not

33. Do you think the main characters used morally good methods to try and solve the mysteries in the books?
   - Definitely yes
   - Probably yes
   - Probably not
   - Definitely not

34. Did you talk to anyone, read online, or do anything else to understand the books more?
   - Yes
   - No
35. *(Display This Question: If 34 = Yes)* What activities did you do to understand the books more?
   - Talk to someone, like a friend or a parent
   - Read about the books more online
   - Read the books again
   - Something else (write here) ____________________________________________

36. Do you prefer when mystery books have a clear ending with *all* the answers, or when things are unclear and you have to think about them more?
   - I prefer when the endings are clear and explain everything
   - I prefer when endings are unclear and do not explain everything
   - I do not mind, because I like both

37. Thank you for participating in this survey! Everyone who completes the survey has a chance to choose a nonprofit organization to support. The nonprofit organization that receives the most votes below will receive a $200USD donation in the name of all survey participants. If you do not wish to vote for any nonprofit, choose the final option.

   Submitting your answer to this question will submit your survey response to the researchers.
   - Indigenous Literacy Foundation (Australia). This nonprofit organization supports access to books and literacy education for Australian First Nations peoples, through working with publishers, schools, libraries and more. For more information, visit https://www.indigenousliteracyfoundation.org.au/.
   - Lambda Literary (U.S.). This nonprofit organization advocates for LGBTQ+ books for children and teenagers through programs such as author visitations to schools, and scholarships for emerging authors. For more information, visit https://www.lambdaliterary.org/.
   - We Need Diverse Books (U.S.). This nonprofit organization supports greater representations of diverse communities in books, runs mentorship programs for young publishing professionals from diverse backgrounds, and hosts an annual literature award. For more information, visit https://diversebooks.org/.
   - Room to Read (Asia and Africa). This nonprofit organization supports girls’ literacy education, access to books, and mentorship opportunities for girls in
countries throughout the continents of Asia and Africa. For more information, visit https://www.roomtoread.org/.

- World Literacy Foundation (Global). This nonprofit organization supports children’s literacy and access to books through programs like teacher and student education, establishing school libraries, and digital reading programs. For more information, visit https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/.

- I do not wish to vote for any nonprofit.
Appendix 2: Resources

These activities are designed to address Priority Area 1 of the Young Adult Library Services Association’s (YALSA) “National Research Agenda on Libraries, Learning, and Teens, 2017–2021,” which is The Impact of Libraries as Teen Formal and Informal Learning Environments. The research and development of these activities was funded by YALSA’s 2021 Frances Henne Research Grant, and the article detailing the full research process and detailed findings is published in The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults. These activities are intended for use with teens (people aged 12–18) but may also be adapted for other age groups.

The activities are designed to enable libraries to use fiction to indirectly support the development of teens’ skills to think critically about misinformation online (or do so in conjunction with existing initiatives). The chosen book series are the Murder Most Unladylike Mystery Series (alternate title Wells & Wong Mysteries) by Robin Stevens, and A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket. While most activities relate directly to the books chosen for the study, some are intentionally more generic so players would not be required to read the series. The activities are designed to be suitable for online and face-to-face environments, and for implementation as part of public library holiday programs, one-off events, and school library settings. Some activities include worksheets.

In these activities, an adult “host” is expected to be present at all times for both safety and wellbeing reasons, as well as to share instructions and support activity progression. However, after giving activity instructions, the adult host should have limited direct involvement in the activities, unless further clarity on instruction or technical matters is required. Teens should be encouraged to complete the activities collaboratively, lead the group discussions, and (where relevant) decide any activity outcomes. At the end of each activity, the host can wrap up the session by encouraging teens to reflect on anything new they have learned or thought about that day. All learning opportunities emerge through the process of engaging in these activities. In this way, these activities aim to integrate the chosen books into library programming to help build teens’ information literacy through interest-driven learning, in which adults act as mentors guiding teens’ participation.
Activity One—The Auction

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to help players to think about how personal motivations, such as profit, may encourage people or groups to tell lies. It does this by asking audience members and players to pay attention to the consistency of what players say. This activity is designed for a large group, but not everyone has to speak, as players may have different levels of confidence.

REQUIREMENTS
An even number of players (minimum four), a host, an audience, and an object for each player.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP
The host chooses an even number of players, minimum four, and explains the game to all players and audience members. Every player can choose (or the host may assign) a profession and an object. The profession should be one that has authority of some kind in society (e.g., teacher, police officer, nurse, professor, journalist). The object should be ordinary (e.g., a pen, a mug, a paperweight). If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

HOW TO PLAY
This activity is set at an imaginary auction where all players are aiming to sell their object for far more than it is worth. Players have five minutes to invent a grand backstory for their ordinary object, with the goal of “selling” it for the largest price at the auction. Importantly, the backstory to the object must be a lie—the more elaborate and dramatic, the better! The backstory must answer the following questions:

1. Who are you? Describe your profession, and how you came into possession of the object.
2. What is your object’s “true” history? Describe its impact on human history, who created, found, or owned it, and any other important information!
3. Why is your object the most valuable at the auction, according to your role as an expert? Describe why everyone should buy your object at great expense.

EXAMPLE
I am a nurse, and this pen might look ordinary, but it is actually the pen used for notetaking by the nurse that treated William Shakespeare after he accidentally broke his hand while tobogganing down Mt Everest when he was 16. Because I am a nurse, I know how important it is to have a good pen to take accurate notes. If it wasn’t for this pen, that nurse would never have

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been able to take notes on Shakespeare’s condition, and his hand would never have recovered, meaning he would never have written any of his famous plays. The whole history of literature depended on this pen used by a nurse like me hundreds of years ago. If you own this pen, you too could take notes that change the future of humanity.

Players take turns to present their object’s backstory to the audience. Then the host and audience members can ask questions to each player about details in the player’s object backstory. Every player must be asked at least one question before a second round of questions can begin. The player must answer in a way that expands on their object’s backstory but doesn’t create any inconsistencies with what they have already said. The host should take notes on the player’s answers, to keep a record of all the facts the player said about their profession and the object.

If an audience member notices that a player’s answers have inconsistencies with their object’s backstory, they can challenge the story by raising their hand and indicating this after the player has finished speaking. The host should check their notes of what the player said and allow the challenge to proceed if there is something inaccurate. The player then has a chance to defend what they said, aiming to talk themselves out of any inaccuracies or contradictions. If the player successfully defends their story, they can stay in the game. If the player can’t defend their contradiction, they are out of the game. After the player’s defense, the host should ask the audience to vote by raising their hands on whether the player successfully defended themselves against the challenge. The last player remaining wins, with their item being deemed the most valuable at the auction.

EXTRA TWIST:
The activity’s difficulty and length can be increased with more rounds if multiple players remain after they have all answered one question and defeated any challenges. In round 2, two individual players could be paired up. The pairs then have 10 minutes to combine the backstories of their objects to sell them as a package at the auction without contradicting any of their previous object backstories (e.g., the pen of Shakespeare’s nurse together with the handkerchief of George Washington). They then present their object package to the audience and answer questions as pairs. Audience members can challenge players’ object backstories if there are inconsistencies; pairs will need to successfully prove their combined story is still consistent. In additional rounds, pairs may combine with other pairs to form groups, with the same process being repeated until all players are eliminated or time runs out.
Activity 2—The Screen Campaign

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to help players to think about how personal biases, such as employment, influences how rules are decided. It encourages players to speak up for their interests. The topic of banning screen devices like computers or phones for those 18 and under was chosen because players would likely feel strongly about it. After questioning the bias in the example statements and writing their own, players can think of how their personal views affected the statement they wrote.

REQUIREMENTS
A group of players, a host, physical or digital copies of the below statements.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP
Players may complete this activity individually or in pairs. The host explains the instructions and gives players copies of the pre-written statements (below) and the prompts (see worksheet) to guide discussion. Hosts may prepare additional prompts if desired. If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

HOW TO PLAY
The setting of this activity is that there is a new law being proposed to make it illegal for anyone 18 or younger to use a technological device, such as a phone, a computer, or a tablet. People with strong views have submitted statements to the government to help them decide whether the law will be passed. Using the example prompts in the worksheet, players study the pre-written statements to decide what opinions they have, why they might have these opinions, and how they express these opinions. The players then regroup to share their answers and discuss any new opinions they have on the proposed law.

Next, players write their own 100-word statement using the example prompts in the worksheet about whether the law should be passed or not. This may be done individually or in pairs. The statements should reflect the players’ own views rather than a fictional character. When the players regroup, players can present their statement to try to convince everyone about whether the law should be passed or not. After all players have presented their statements, the
host holds a vote among the group determining whether the law is passed or not, and players can vote by raising their hand.

The group can then reflect together on whether their own statements were biased in any way. To do this, the host can use the worksheet prompts for discussing pre-written statements to ask players about their own responses. This may transition into a broader discussion about the nature of bias in rule-making. Additional questions could include asking whether players think bias is always a bad thing and if they think it is possible for anyone to ever be unbiased.

**THE SCREEN CAMPAIGN: PRE-WRITTEN STATEMENTS**

**STATEMENT ONE: A POLICE OFFICER SPECIALIZING IN CYBERSECURITY**

As a police officer, I am in favor of this law being passed. Children and teenagers are not responsible enough to use these devices for only legal matters. For example, thousands of them illegally download things like books, music, and TV shows, which means the artists don’t get paid for their work. At the same time, many children and teenagers put themselves at risk of becoming the victims of crimes. They post so much personal information online that dangerous people can track them and find them. The ability of bad people to be anonymous online makes it a dangerous space. Only adults are truly mature enough to be using these devices. This law will reduce crime and keep our children and teenagers safe.

**STATEMENT TWO: A POPULAR TEENAGE INFLUENCER**

I know I’m only 15 but I don’t think this law should be passed. I started my YouTube channel when I was 10 years old—yes, I know the rules say you have to be 13 years old, but I ignored that, just like people will ignore this new law if it passes, so it won’t make a difference anyway. Children and teenagers need to be able to make their own decisions about this stuff too. I asked my 200,000 followers to sign a petition against this law, and nearly 50,000 of them signed it. Most of them are teenagers like me so obviously we care about this issue and we want our voices heard. I don’t know anyone who is doing anything illegal online and I’ve never broken any rules, so I don’t think that’s a real issue. I don’t think this law should pass.

**STATEMENT THREE: A MOTHER WHOSE CHILD WAS CYBERBULLIED**

I’m not sure what I think about this law. My daughter begged me for a phone and social media account so she could talk to her friends when she was 14 years old. I was nervous, but she said all her friends had these things, so I agreed. Within a few months, she became very depressed, but she wouldn’t tell me why. Eventually, I confiscated her phone, and saw she was being
cyberbullied about her appearance by a group of kids she didn’t know. We blocked the bullies and since then she has only spoken to her friends and been much happier, but sometimes I wish I’d never even given her a phone because of all the bad things that happened. Maybe if those kids hadn’t been allowed to be online or use these devices, my daughter wouldn’t have mental health issues now.

THE SCREEN CAMPAIGN: WORKSHEET

Prompts for discussing a pre-written statement:

- Does the writer of this statement seem biased in any way?

- What might have motivated this person to submit this statement?

- What evidence does the writer give for their opinion being right?

- What emotions does the writer express, and do they influence your perspective?

- What will the writer gain or lose if the law either passes or does not pass?

- Any other thoughts on this statement?

Prompts for writing a statement:

- Who are you and what is your connection to the issue?
• Do you think this law should be passed, or not?
  
  __________________________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________________________

• Explain your reasons for why the law should or should not be passed.
  
  __________________________________________________________________________
  __________________________________________________________________________
**Activity 3—Mr. Poe On Trial**

**PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY**
This activity aims to help players to think about being informed about issues as a personal responsibility. It also encourages players to consider whether being uninformed is something a person should be punished for, because nobody can know everything. The figure of Mr. Poe is chosen because he is one of the most divisive characters in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. He closely follows the official rules about how the Baudelaires are supposed to be cared for, but at the same time, he does not listen to them when they ask for help. The main question is whether Mr. Poe is responsible for the Baudelaires’ suffering: Is he guilty of allowing the Baudelaires to be hurt by Count Olaf because he didn’t listen to them? Or was he making innocent mistakes that should be forgiven because he was following the rules?

**REQUIREMENTS**
A group of players, a host, physical or digital copies of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

**ENVIRONMENT**
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

**SET UP:**
This activity can be done informally as a group discussion. It can also be done as a formal debate in two teams with three speakers and a notetaker, plus an audience. The host can choose the format. If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

**HOW TO PLAY**
Ask players to prepare a statement sharing their view of Mr. Poe as innocent or guilty using examples from the books as evidence as much as possible. Players work in small groups, ideally of three to four members each. If done as a formal debate, each speaker should write a one-to-two-minute speech on a particular point of evidence. If done as an informal activity, players should write a few notes with specific examples from the books to support their opinion in group discussion. Players may use the worksheet prompts to think about whether Mr. Poe is guilty or innocent.

After all players have shared their statements in the format agreed upon with the host, a decision can be made by a vote about whether Mr. Poe is guilty of having let the Baudelaires be hurt, or not guilty.
The outcome can start a bigger discussion exploring ideas like:

- Do we all have a responsibility to “be informed” when we are sharing our views?
- Is it unreasonable to expect that everyone can be informed about everything?
- At what times might it be most important for us to be informed about an issue?

**MR. POE ON TRIAL: WORKSHEET**

Prompts for thinking about Mr. Poe’s actions:

- What was Mr. Poe’s motive for looking after the Baudelaires?

  __________________________________________

- Are any of Mr. Poe’s excuses for not following the Baudelaires’ wishes reasonable?

  __________________________________________

- Did refusing to act on the Baudelaires’ concerns make Mr. Poe’s life easier or harder?

  __________________________________________

- Do you think Mr. Poe cared about the Baudelaires as people?

  __________________________________________

- Remembering that Mr. Poe is a successful banker, but also made lots of mistakes, is he a smart person or not?

  __________________________________________

- What other thoughts do you have about Mr. Poe?

  __________________________________________

- Is Mr. Poe innocent or guilty of allowing the Baudelaires to suffer?

  __________________________________________
Activity 4—Inspector Priestly Discussion

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to help players to think critically about laws and rules. They consider what their expectations are of authority figures and the question of when, if ever, “the end justifies the means.” In Murder Most Unladylike, the character of Inspector Priestly is responsible for keeping people safe, solving crimes, and following the law. However, he often needs Hazel and Daisy’s help to solve crimes. This can put the girls in danger and break the rules Inspector Priestly is supposed to be following.

REQUIREMENTS
A group of players, a host, physical or digital copies of Murder Most Unladylike.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP:
Players form pairs (if needed), and the host provides some questions for discussion from the list below.

HOW TO PLAY:
In pairs or as part of the whole group, players share their thoughts in response to the questions below. Either the players or the host can choose which of the questions players discuss. Players do not need to discuss all the questions. Discussing as a whole group, the players can share their responses to the questions and explain why they had this opinion. All players should have the chance to share what they thought.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
• Did you like Inspector Priestly more at the start of the series, when he tried to stop Hazel and Daisy’s investigations, or at the end of the series, when he helped them?
• Do you think it was right for Inspector Priestly to break the rules of the police, and let Hazel and Daisy investigate, because it meant the criminal was caught at the end?
• Inspector Priestly often asks Hazel and Daisy not to tell anyone that he has let them investigate. Do you think this means he knows he is doing something wrong?
• By letting Hazel and Daisy become more involved in the investigations and putting the girls in danger, is Inspector Priestly being a less responsible adult?
• Should Inspector Priestly be punished for breaking the police rules and letting Hazel and Daisy investigate, even though it helped catch the criminals?

• Do you think the adults in the series trust Inspector Priestly more because he is a police officer?

• Do you think the adults in the series would think Inspector Priestly was doing something wrong by letting Hazel and Daisy investigate when it was dangerous?

• Inspector Priestly usually takes all the credit for solving the crime, even though it was usually solved by Hazel and Daisy’s investigations. Is it wrong of him to be taking credit when he didn’t solve the crimes?

• Is it acceptable for Inspector Priestly to sometimes break rules if it means the criminals are caught? Or should he be expected to follow the rules perfectly because he is a police officer?
Activity 5—The Daily Punctilio Fact-Check

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to give players the opportunity to examine a biased and misleading newspaper article. The Daily Punctilio is the main newspaper in A Series of Unfortunate Events. Its articles are usually factually incorrect and can contain deliberate lies. Readers of the series can easily know that the newspaper publishes “fake news” because they are eyewitnesses to the true events the protagonists experience. However, many people in the fictional world believe the newspaper because they trust the source without thinking critically about the content. This activity uses the full articles printed in the book Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography, which accompanies the main series.

REQUIREMENTS:
A group of players, a host, physical or digital copies of Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP:
Players may work individually, in pairs, or in small groups, with the host organizing the format at the start. Players will need to be provided with copies of The Daily Punctilio articles, which are printed on pages 77–79, 80, 81, 82, and 118 of Lemony Snicket: The Unauthorized Autobiography, in order to complete this activity. Ideally, players will also have copies of the books available to read the further context around the articles. If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

HOW TO PLAY
Players can choose an article from The Daily Punctilio. They take notes on the features of the article that make it seem either reliable or unreliable. Players should be encouraged to examine the article both as the informed reader they are and as if they are average readers of the newspaper with no inside information on the events. This is so they can consider how the uninformed readers may be convinced by the fake articles. Players should also write down what impact these features could have on readers. Examples of features in the article that players could examine are included on the worksheet. Players should also consider what factors influence their belief in the article, such as the article author.
Players share their thoughts about why *The Daily Punctilio* may have used these features and discuss their thoughts together. Players should then develop a list of strategies that the journalists of *The Daily Punctilio* could have used to produce a more truthful and trustworthy article, such as checking if their sources are actually reliable. This list for *The Daily Punctilio* may be developed by referring to the worksheet’s examples of notable features.

The host can then broaden the conversation to ask what the players do to think about and check if the information that they read is reliable and true. Players should listen to each others’ examples, and make notes of all the strategies they use, to develop their own checklist of steps to go through if they read something that may not be true online.

**THE DAILY PUNCTILIO FACT-CHECK: WORKSHEET**

Features to examine in the article from the *The Daily Punctilio*:

- Which article did you choose? Write the headline here.

- Are there any factual mistakes or misunderstandings? How does this impact the article?

- Does it include an unreliable or untrustworthy source? If so, explain why the source is unreliable. How does this impact the article?

- Does it use emotional or biased language, or calm, objective writing? How does this impact the article?

- Does the article speculate on things without any evidence? How does this impact the article?
• Does the article seem biased strongly toward or against a person or people? How does this impact the article?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

• Does the article use confusing or misleading headlines? How does this impact the article?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

• What other features have you noticed about this article that make it unreliable?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Checklist of features to look out for in news articles:

1. I should pay attention to __________________________________________
   because ___________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

2. I should pay attention _____________________________________________
   because ___________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

3. I should pay attention to __________________________________________
   because ___________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

4. I should pay attention to __________________________________________
   because ___________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

5. I should pay attention to __________________________________________
   because ___________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
Activity 6—Murder Most Unladylike News Article

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to provide players with the challenge to write a news article—within some of the constraints that real journalists face, such as needing to engage readers or keep to short word limits. Players are encouraged to think about what makes a reliable and engaging new article, and how being too reliable may be boring, while being too engaging may mean the article is less reliable.

REQUIREMENTS:
A group of players, a host, physical or digital copies of Murder Most Unladylike, access to a computer, word processing software or similar tools, internet.

ENVIRONMENT:
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP:
Players may work individually or in pairs. Ask players to choose a favorite case investigated by Hazel and Daisy from the Murder Most Unladylike series. Alternatively, if the group is reading the series together, such as in a book club, they may all work on the same case. If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

HOW TO PLAY
Individually or in pairs, players create a news article about the crime that was solved in the selected book. The article can be a 250-word written piece for a newspaper, a script for a one-minute TV story about the crime, or another format based on how the players discover news.

PLAYERS SHOULD CONSIDER
1. What essential truthful information about the crime should be included in the article
2. Which credible sources (e.g., characters) they can quote
3. How interesting the article is, as it must engage readers

Players can be encouraged to make their article as professional-looking as possible if they have access to a computer, including the use of graphics.

Players share their article with the rest of the group, reading it out and briefly explaining how they decided what to include and how they made it interesting. All players can then give feedback to each other on how informative, clear, reliable, and interesting the articles are, as well as how they may be improved. Feedback may also include fact-checking the articles based on the details in the books.
EXTRA TWIST
For a bonus twist in the activity, the host can secretly ask one player to create a fake but potentially believable article. The chosen player can make changes to the true events in the case they report on while aiming to convince other players that their article is true. Before players share their articles, the host informs everyone that there is a “fake news” article in the mix. After everyone has presented and received feedback, they can cast a vote for which article they believe is the deliberately created fake news. The host can ask players to think about how the tools of good journalism can also be used to create convincing fake news.
Activity 7—A Word Which Here Means…

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to give players an opportunity to think about why certain words are used in particular contexts and how word choice can influence the overall message. It is inspired in part by *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, as Lemony Snicket often uses obscure words and gives definitions that are very specific to a situation so as to be biased. However, this activity does not involve the books directly.

REQUIREMENTS
A group of players, a host, access to a computer, word processing software or similar tools, and internet.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP
This activity is primarily completed alone, with some time spent in group discussion at the end. Instructions are given at the beginning of the activity period, and if appropriate, the host may check in on players’ progress throughout.

HOW TO PLAY
Each player in this activity keeps a “word diary” for a week. This does not have to be a physical diary; a word processing document or notes application in a phone can also be used. At least once a day for a week, players should write down a word or short phrase they have read or heard that interests them. These words may come from news articles, song lyrics, advertisements, a book, a video game, a conversation, or any other suitable format, and may include brand names. For each word, players should write a few sentences in response to the worksheet prompts.

After a week, players should have at least seven words—but they can write about more if they want! Upon regrouping, players can share some or all of their words and notes with the group. Any words or phrases that players consider especially interesting can be discussed amongst the group.

BONUS ACTIVITY
After the group discussion, players can create visual representations of their favorite words among those they have collected. A hands-on collage or digital moodboard can be a particularly great format for this, along with more complex options like drawings or gifsets. Visual representations should include the chosen word and express the feeling(s), concept(s), and
meaning(s) that the player thinks the word evokes. When finished, these can be displayed online or within a library. If there are instances where players have different interpretations of the same word, this can be a great opportunity to encourage them to think more deeply about all the meanings words can have and how we may interpret them differently.

**A WORD WHICH HERE MEANS…: WORKSHEET**

Reflecting on your chosen word:

- Where did I find this word and who said it?

- What interests me about this word?

- What was the benefit of using this word at this time?

- What emotional impact does this word have on me?

- What other words could have been used instead of this word?

- Any other thoughts on this word?

- (Optional research question) What is the history of this word?
Activity 8—Build-A-Reader

PURPOSE OF ACTIVITY
This activity aims to help players to think about how information and products target certain audiences or consumers. It provides an opportunity for players to think critically about how objects reveal their target demographic through features like language or images.

REQUIREMENTS
A group of players, a host, digital or physical copies of the covers and titles for either Murder Most Unladylike or A Series of Unfortunate Events.

ENVIRONMENT
Face-to-face or online (e.g., Zoom).

SET UP
This activity may be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. The host should provide digital or physical copies of the covers and titles for either Murder Most Unladylike or A Series of Unfortunate Events to players. Players need not have read the books, so this activity could be completed before a book club has started reading a book rather than after. If played face-to-face, participants should have a pen and paper to make notes.

HOW TO PLAY
The host should briefly explain that titles and cover designs are some of the tools that book publishers use to attract people to buy and read their books. While they are creative and artistic, these features are also advertising for the product (the story) to engage readers and convince them to buy and read the book.

Players examine the series title and the title and cover design of one book in the chosen series. The individual book may be chosen by players or assigned by the host. Players should make notes about the series title, book, title and cover design using the worksheet.

Next, using their notes and the series title, book title, and cover design as references, players then “build” an ideal reader for the book. The host should explain that an ideal reader is the (fictional) person who would perfectly match and love all the qualities that the players have observed about the book in their notes: they are the dream customer who the book publishers want to market the book to. The profile for the ideal reader of the book they examined should include the qualities in the worksheet, with more added as desired.
Players present their profile of the book’s ideal reader to the rest of the group, answering this key question: why do they think this fictional person they designed has all the traits of the ideal reader that the publishers are targeting the book to? Presentations can be around one to two minutes maximum.

Once all players have presented the profile they made, the host can then provide examples of other branding and logos, which may include product advertising, government institutions, and even their library. Using the above prompts as a guide, the group can discuss the feelings, concepts, and meanings evoked by these brandings and what type of person they target as a customer. Players should be encouraged to think about these things in the future when they see different kinds of advertising.

**BUILD-A-READER: WORKSHEET**

Features to examine from the book:

- What feelings, concepts, and meanings are evoked by the series title?
  
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- What feelings, concepts, and meanings are evoked by the book title?
  
  ____________________________________________________________________________

- What feelings, concepts, and meanings are evoked by the cover design?
  
  ____________________________________________________________________________

Profile of the ideal reader:

- What is their name? __________________________________________________________
- What is their gender? _________________________________________________________
- What is their age? ____________________________________________________________
- What is their background? ____________________________________________________
- What is their personality? _____________________________________________________

  ____________________________________________________________________________

- What are their likes and hopes for the future? _________________________________

  ____________________________________________________________________________
• What are their dislikes and fears for the future? ________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
• What are some other relevant features about them? __________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
• Why would they buy this book? __________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________
  ________________________________________________________________

Appendix 3: Suggestions for Facilitating Group Discussions

1. Prior to the activity, the host should make a few notes about their own answers to any questions or prompts they will be giving.
2. Express to any players at the outset of a discussion that there are no right or wrong answers, it’s about their own reflections and ideas. Remind everyone that they must respect everyone else’s ideas.
3. Give the players some time to think on each question before answering, and don’t rush to fill the silence—they’re probably thinking.
4. Reframe the question or prompt into something simpler.
5. If players don’t speak up with any ideas, the host can share one of their own pre-written ideas (see point 1), and then ask players for their opinions on this idea.

Notes


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33 Heather Voskuyl, “Plainsong or Polyphony? Australian Award-Winning Novels of the 1990s for Adolescent Readers” (PhD diss., University of Technology Sydney, 2008), 6.


35 Thomson, Understanding Teenagers’ Reading.


39 Thomson, Understanding Teenagers’ Reading, 114.


NAMLE, *Slowing the Infodemic.*


AustLit Database, “Teaching with AustLit”; Reading Australia, “Secondary Archives.”
50 NAMLE, *Slowing the Infodemic*.


52 Young Adult Library Services Association, *National Research Agenda*, 1.

53 eSafety Commissioner, “The Big Issues.”


