

Faith & Fake News: A Guide to Consuming Information Wisely

Rachel I. Wightman. *Faith & Fake News: A Guide to Consuming Information Wisely*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023. 184pp. Paperback. \$19.99. 9780802882455.

Faith & Fake News: A Guide to Consuming Information Wisely is a book written to teach evangelical Christians information literacy. The author, Rachel I. Wightman, is the Associate Director, Instruction and Outreach, of the library at Concordia University, St. Paul. The book originates in Wightman's work teaching information literacy in local churches and university classrooms. Right from the start, Wightman clarifies that her book and teaching are motivated by Christian discipleship. She argues that people of faith are responsible for consuming information in a way that overcomes cultural division and promotes Christian formation (7–9). Throughout the book, Wightman's faith commitments undergird her professional values as they pertain to information literacy. A lack of information literacy, she suggests, is precisely what leads to a breakdown of communities and discord. Understanding information literacy as Christian formation can restore relationships and lead to greater compassion that stems from ideological differences.

The strengths of this book are multiple. First, Wightman explains complex concepts in an understandable way with relatable examples. She draws on the political world and the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic response to relate issues like algorithm-driven search and misinformation to everyday experiences shared by many in a US context. Second, each chapter in the book ends with a set of reflections, exercises, and a bibliography. Readers, including instructors and librarians, will find these resources useful as they reflect on their own information environment or design information literacy instruction. For instance, in the chapter on the information landscape, Wightman provides exercises that ask the reader to search for a topic or event of their choosing in Google Scholar, the Associated Press, and a social media platform. Wightman instructs the reader to compare the results and identify how their content relates to their platform.

The book is not without weaknesses. These mostly come from some (not uncommon) assumptions that motivate information literacy instruction. For instance, one of the major motivators of the work is the assumption that religious persons want to know more or are willing to have their knowledge changed by facts previously unknown (89). Scholarship on the information-seeking behavior of religious persons suggests that the information needs of religious persons are more complex than that (Freeburg 2018). In other words, information needs and sources often conflict with religious belief and organization. The deep complexity of information and religious belief is itself a part of the history of Christianity and evangelicalism in the United States, and so it is surprising that Wightman does not engage directly with it.

There is also an issue of definitions. The work makes several assumptions about what particular words or phrases mean without clearly defining or properly contextualizing them. For instance, in the chapter on fake news, Wightman states: "Another thing that may seem obvious but is important to mention directly is that 'fake news' doesn't mean news that you disagree with" (67). This definition ignores the explicit political context in which the phrase "fake news" arrived in contemporary parlance. While the history of fake news is long, many contemporary readers would only recognize it from its use in the 2014–2022 media coverage of the Trump administration. The Trump administration utilized the phrase "fake news" to dismiss accurate reporting (Ross and Rivers 2018). In other words, it is now used precisely to dismiss information that individuals disagree with.

While there is much to be commended throughout the book, it is precisely that lack of historical and political contextualization—outside of illustrative examples—that makes up the central weakness of the work. Certainly, this weakness is not insurmountable, but the book would be stronger were parts of it more deeply historicized. Those who teach from the volume will want to expand the work's benefits by providing the missing contextualization.

Nevertheless, Wightman clearly achieves her claims. Insofar as Wightman sets out to connect information literacy to her community's faith commitments, the volume succeeds. The final chapter of the book connects to Jesus's command to love one's neighbor as oneself. Wightman fundamentally understands information literacy to be sociological and relational. This understanding connects deeply with her theological position.

Wightman's style is conversational and accessible. Her framing is also explicitly theological and evangelical. While the style makes the book approachable, some may find the presentation limiting due to the specificity of its theological commitments. At times, one wonders if information literacy can solve the many problems that Wightman seems to argue that it can. In this way, the complexity of lived information ecologies are glossed over. What does one do, for instance, when a person of faith, any faith, rejects accurate information because it conflicts directly with their own religious commitments? How should the theological librarian approach information literacy with that in mind? Throughout my reading, I wanted Wightman to answer, or at least consider, these questions.

The book's strongest parts arrive in "Part 1: The Information Landscape," where Wightman expertly describes the information environment of the early 21st century. Theological librarians have much to learn from the way she understands, describes, and teaches concepts like algorithm-powered search engines and the challenges of "doing your own research." In these chapters, Wightman's compassion for the information novice and her pedagogical acumen shine through. While some may desire to distance themselves from the overtly theological language that motivates Wightman's work, there is also much to learn here. Wightman herself writes, "I've been told that I over-spiritualize these topics, that maybe this is all a bit too much" (13). This, I think, is an accurate account of the work. Wightman's approach, however, is generative for thinking about the role of information literacy and religious persons. Those who work in institutions that train Christian leaders and clergy will certainly be interested in exploring information literacy as a part of Christian formation. If the book's greatest fault is Wightman's tendency to over-spiritualize, she doesn't do so naively. Understanding information literacy as Christian formation is a core feature of the book's argument.

Whether or not this book should be purchased is up to the theological commitments and expectations of the librarian and their students. Those who want to anchor their teaching in scriptural texts and Christian discipleship will find this volume worthwhile. Additionally, this book would work well as a textbook on information literacy because of its straightforward explanations and exercises. However, instructors would almost certainly want to supplement the volume to add complexity and nuance to the topic. Ultimately, Wightman is to be commended for her work to bring information literacy outside of the library and for the clarity of thought she brings to complex topics.

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