Book Review: *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation*
by Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2007).........The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable by Nassim Taleb (2007)

Brad Sietz, Eastern Michigan University

First used in the world of politics, the idea of "spin" - slanting information to promote a particular point of view - has filtered out over the past decade or so into all aspects of the culture. Anyone trying to understand any issue of importance (or even the latest Britney Spears drama) has to wade through a wide-variety of information – from newspaper articles, to TV talking heads, to energized bloggers - and determine "Is that really what happened or is there some spin doctoring going on?" Of course, someone presenting biased information is not new; that's been happening for millennia. But in today's information-saturated environment, where information can seemingly come from anywhere or anyone, while it's easier than ever to find at least some information about anything, it's not easy to know what to believe.

unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation is a book that attempts to give the reader guidance on how to find, as near as one can, the best information possible and use it correctly. Wait a minute…that sounds like the job of a good instruction librarian! That's true, but librarians did not write this book; the authors are a journalist (Brooks Jackson) and a Communications professor (Kathleen Hall Jamieson), both with a deep interest in fairness, particularly in politics. This non-librarian perspective on a "librarian" topic makes the book an interesting examination of many issues our profession thinks about all the time.

The strength of *unSpun* is how it lays out, through scores of interesting examples, how and why people get "spun." It's not just politicians or corporations trying to advance their agenda by presenting misleading or incomplete information, it is that we can be our own worst enemy. Biology and human nature makes people quite susceptible to being misled, particularly if we are not self-aware.

What about Libraries?

In fact, while it isn't until 3/4 of the way through the book until libraries are first mentioned, the prescription to becoming "unspun" (the last 1/3 of the book) is quite close to what many librarians teach, and it is interesting to see that discussed in non-library literature. Many of the prescriptions in the book will be familiar. While it's not the ARCL Information Literacy standards, the authors do credibly argue how the Internet can be a great source of quality information if one knows how to filter it properly. They discuss many solid rules and tips on how to evaluate online material, including giving LII.org and a Widener University library "Web Evaluation" tutorial praise.

Integration into Library Instruction

This book could be rather useful to any librarians looking for examples to discuss with their students, particularly those librarians who teach for-credit library instruction classes and have class time to assign reading. Either certain chapters could be assigned to students to help provide background for a discussion, or one of the numerous, pertinent examples could be used to help students see tangibly how information can be misused or misleading. For instance, there is a great example of a how a quote in the *Yale Law Journal* by the famed Scopes Monkey trial defense lawyer Clarence Darrow impugning evolution turned out to be completely false. This example is particularly useful because the book walks the reader through how even information from a reputable, peer-reviewed journal can be wrong (or at least misleading), thus encouraging students to effectively be journalists. If they see something at odds with common sense or there isn't general agreement from experts on a particular point, people should keep digging for other information. It can be hard to get students to do research (as opposed to finding two articles, and two articles only, because that is exactly what the assignment said), and perhaps by giving pertinent examples, it can help them see the importance of doing more than the minimum.

Be aware the book does discuss numerous hot-button political issues, such the Iraq War, abortion, and gun con-

trol, but the authors use these topics in a balanced way to demonstrate that spin can come from any party or any type of person. They close with the thought to be "skeptical, but not cynical", ready to accept information as long as we are reasonably certain, based on the guidance in *unSpun*, that it is the best available.

…………….

The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable by Nassim Taleb (currently a BusinessWeek Best Seller) is similar to *unSpun* in that it has an author's viewpoint amongst a myriad of interesting examples. However, it is much more of a philosophical treatise (or even a polemic) than a journalistic exercise. The author is polymath smart and sees the world in a different way than the typical person. Taleb's thesis is actually quite simple, but is counter to how people operate: the world is marked by "black swans" - rare, unforeseen events that have an extreme impact - and humans, in retrospect, think they should have seen these black swans coming through post-event rationalization. However, we will almost never see the black swan coming, because we are predisposed to what we have seen before and what we see every day, i.e., white swans. Black swans can be any type of event: the success of the movie *Titanic*, the rise of Wikipedia as perhaps the most prominent information resource on the web, or the 9/11 attacks.

With each black swan, people typically react by looking at the past event and then plan for the future based on it. Sounds reasonable, no? However, Taleb argues that planning based on analyzing a past event misses the point and is a poor use of time. Black swans are inherently unpredictable; who would've thought Wikipedia, a site maintained by mostly anonymous users with unverifiable credentials, would become so amazingly popular? You might answer, "Well, *I* did" and perhaps that is true for a select few people. But more likely, you didn't see it coming ahead of time (or at least underestimated its impact significantly) and only in retrospect does it seem obvious why the Wikipedia model, or any other black swan, came into such prominence.

Thus, Taleb states people should not put any stock in predictions, particularly those of "experts". Predictions

are typically based on the human habit of looking for patterns, but there are none that can predict black swans. Because of cognitive problems such as confirmation bias (remember from *unSpun*?), desire to seek a narrative (i.e., this event led to that event) and humans' inclination to simplify the world, we live in a black swan world but do not act like it, as we go about our daily lives and plan our jobs essentially based on what we've seen before.

Application for Librarians

How does this apply to librarians? This book definitely strongly states its case and, to this reader, goes overboard in essentially stating that predictions, and thus plans made on them, are worthless. Outside of *Black Swan*, there have always been variations on this theme, such as the old saying, "Do you want to know how to make God laugh?" Answer: "Tell God your plans." Of course the world is unpredictable and we can never know what next year (or tomorrow) will bring; but with good planning, we can be sure most of the time. Then, we can leaven those plans with the book's larger point (to use another old saying) to "expect the unexpected." As any librarian can tell you, there are seemingly more changes and "swans" dive-bombing the profession every year. There are significant events and technologies that make the way librarians typically have worked seem outmoded or out of place if we don't respond correctly. Wikipedia, open access journals, YouTube, Google, IM, millennial learners, distance learning – the list is endless. But with proper planning that accounts for the fact that everything can't be planned, librarians can remember to expect change and our users (not to mention the administrators and legislatures who typically set our budgets) to act in ways we don't expect.

fusion resulted from being unable read the students' handwriting; of course, this wasn't a problem when the students were able to type out their responses. I wish I could have had the students type their responses out every time, but that wasn't always feasible. But I'll be sure to emphasize better penmanship in the future!

Overall, however, I was so encouraged by the intelligible responses I got from the essays that I decided to continue using the essay in fall 2006 and spring 2007. I am in the process of evaluating the essays (there are many, many more this time!) from those sessions. I intend to publish the results to see if modifications I made to the sessions made a difference, based on a comparison of the essays from the summer with those of the fall and spring. I would also like to see how a larger sample size might affect the kinds of keywords and phrases I receive – again, in comparison to the first study. Moreover, I used the essay in classes other than English 101 and 102 and am interested to see how including other disciplines might affect the kinds of keywords and phrases produced, compared to the first study.

I highly recommend using the start/stop essay, if you're trying to get some quick feedback on your instructional sessions, as well as trying to make an information session meaningful to the students. The start/stop essay allows you to not only evaluate the effectiveness and content of your sessions – it also gives the students a chance to reflect on their habits and how they may modify those habits based on instruction. As far as I'm concerned, everybody wins!

References

Flaspohler, M. R. (2003). Information literacy program assessment: one small college takes the big plunge. *Reference Services Review*, *31*(2), 129-140.

Lowe, M. (2006, Fall). The Start/Stop essay in instruction and information literacy at University of Louisiana at Monroe. *Louisiana Libraries, 69* (2): 7-11

Everyone, librarians included, can benefit from being reminded the world is unpredictable and knowledge and understanding of it is limited. Thus, make sure any planning you or your institution is doing allows for a rapid change, if necessary, because you don't know what's coming next. Additionally, try not to focus on systems and practices that have historically worked – just because they have worked in the past doesn't mean they will work in the future.

Black Swan is a bit more intellectual heavy-lifting than many books and it is a rollicking, if a bit disjointed and wordy, overview of a wide-range of topics and situations. However, if you want to challenge yourself and think about the way you or your institution views the future, *Black Swan* is worth a look.