

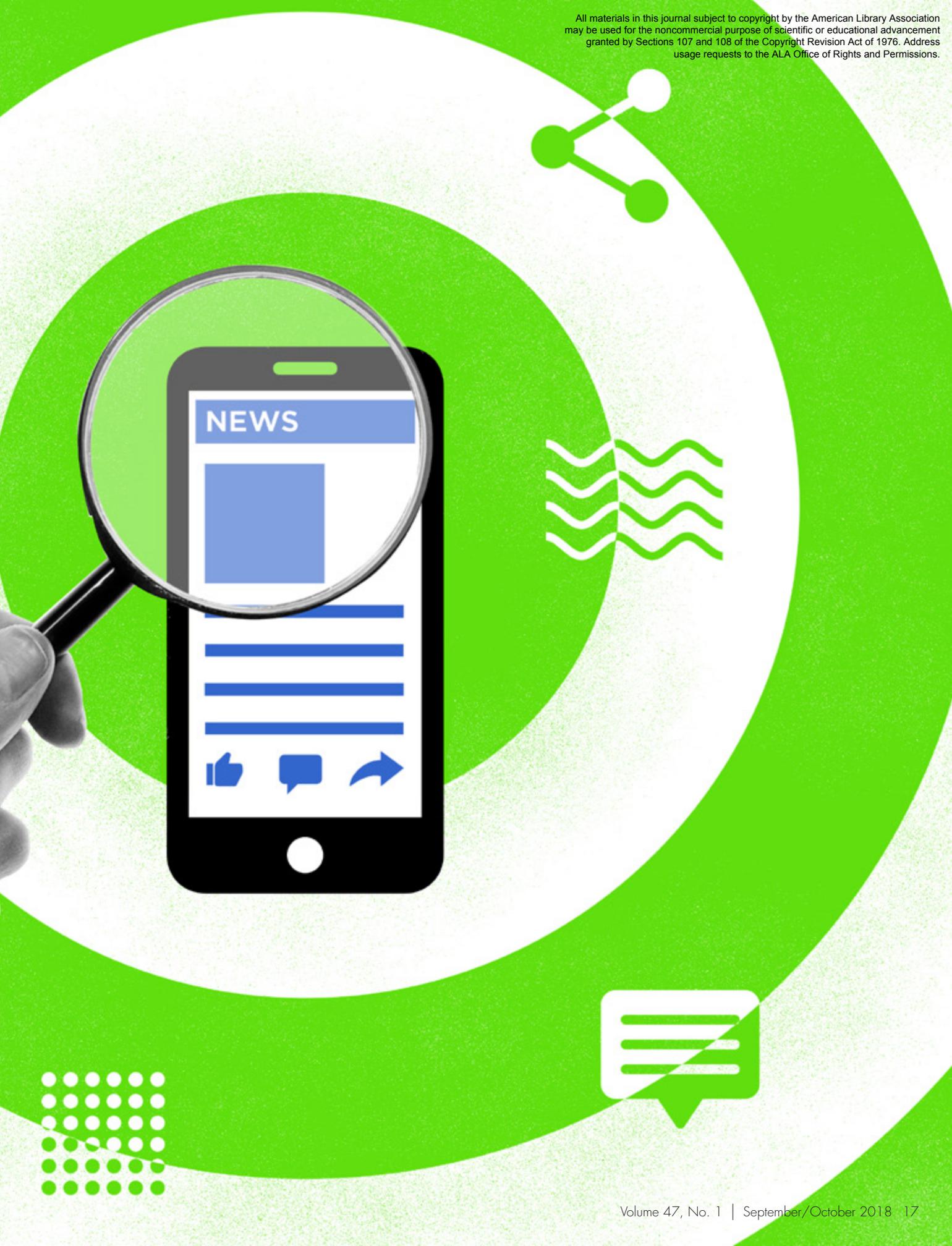
FEATURE

# Media Literacy

## A Moving Target

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Students are looking more and more to social media for their daily news. In a 2015 Pew Research Center report on Millennials' use of social media, researchers reported that "when it comes to where younger Americans get news about politics and government, social media look to be the local TV of the Millennial generation. About six-in-ten online Millennials (61%) report getting political news on Facebook in a given week, a much larger percentage than turn to any other news source..." (Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa 2015).

In 2018 our school library conducted a year-end survey covering use of information and technology (see figure 1). When asked where they hear or read about local and world news, the top three responses by our students were news websites (28.1 percent), television news (22.2 percent), and Snapchat Discover (17.6 percent). We had decided to add Snapchat Discover as an option because, according to 2017 app industry information about Snapchat, "U.S. penetration rate among 12–17 years old is 83%" (Dogtiev 2018) and because an environmental scan of our student body led us to the conclusion that use of the app was widespread among our students.

It is no longer reasonable to say, "Don't get your news from Snapchat." Instead, we must teach students to verify this news and know how to cite the information. In October 2017 we conducted a voluntary student workshop at our school titled "Snapchat Discovery: How to Impress Adults with Your Current Events Knowledge without Even Having to Leave Snapchat." In the workshop we taught students how to read and subscribe to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Economist*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, and the *New York Times* on Snapchat Discover. The workshop was well attended, and students had many

questions about the resources in Snapchat Discover. But in November 2017, just one month later, Snapchat did an update that changed the way users viewed stories on Discover. This update required students to take an extra step if they wanted to read news. The *Verge* technology website reported, "Snap[chat] today introduced a redesign of its flagship app intended to promote more intimate sharing among friend groups while pushing professionally produced content into a separate feed" (Newton 2017).

When explaining the change, Snapchat published on their blog: "While blurring the lines between professional content creators and your friends has been an interesting Internet experiment, it has also produced some strange side-effects (like fake news) and made us feel like we have to perform for our friends rather than just express ourselves" (Snap 2017).

About as fast as Snapchat made the change they began plans to modify the update. Snapchat announced in May 2018 that the change would be modified in response to a user petition: "The company acknowledged that the 'new Snapchat has felt uncomfortable for many,' and now the company is yielding to some of those requests for change" (Ong 2018). As a result, Snapchat is now back on the table as an active and convenient news source for our students.

Because content from major media outlets is now available through social media websites such as Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, we must admit that these sources can be legitimate, and, of course, they are a popular source of news for our students. We must remember that ours is a tech-saturated world. In a recent Pew Research Center report Alex Halavais advises, "The primary change needs to come in education.

From a very early age, people need to understand how to interact with networked, digital technologies. They need to learn how to use social media and learn how not to be used by it. They need to understand how to assemble reliable information and how to detect crap" (Anderson and Rainie 2018).

## Need for Media Literacy Mindset

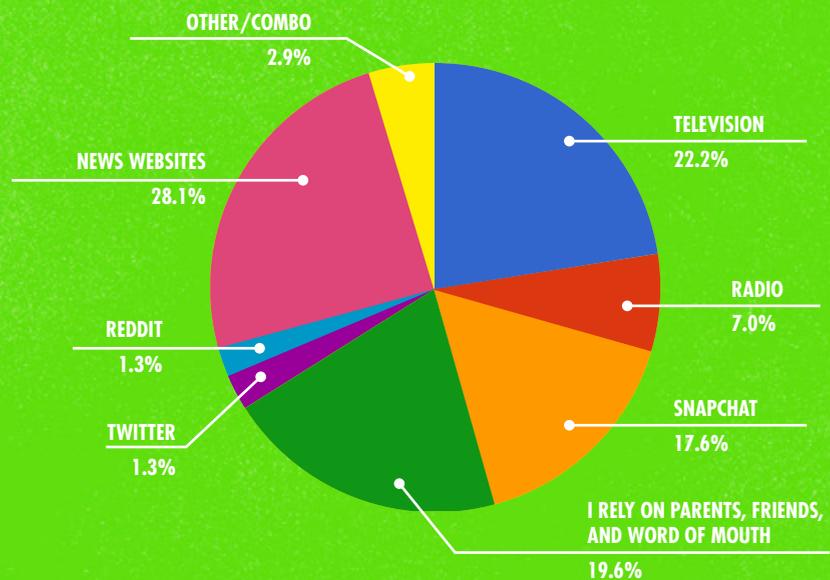
In our year-end library survey almost 20 percent of students surveyed admitted that they rely on parents, friends, and word of mouth for local and world news. Nationally, we found in a Common Sense Media report that 33 percent of students often get news from teachers or other adults in their lives, 45 percent often get news from family, and 25 percent often get news from friends (Common Sense Media 2017). When we factor in our awareness of human nature and of implicit bias, we recognize that we must teach students about information and media bias—especially because many are getting their news secondhand.

Tools and examples we can use as educators abound. For example, in December 2016 a colleague pointed out a graphic depicting where news outlets fell in terms of political bias. On the chart, the prominent news outlets were placed as right-leaning, left-leaning, center/mainstream, or fringe. It took a while to determine the origin of the graphic. Within one day of the original post, it had already gone viral and was remade into a meme-style graphic through Imgur. It turns out, the graphic was developed by a patent attorney Vanessa Otero and was posted on her blog *All Generalizations Are False*. Otero offers a blank chart on the blog for use under a Creative Commons license, which requests attribution and should be acceptable for non-commercial use (Otero 2016).

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## “WHERE DO YOU HEAR OR READ ABOUT LOCAL AND WORLD NEWS?”

*Figure 1. Results of 2018 Annual Library Survey from the Webb School Library.*



When we factor in our awareness of human nature and of implicit bias, we recognize that we must teach students about information and media bias—especially because many are getting their news secondhand.

Another recent graphic categorizing news outlets in order of trustworthy to non-trustworthy was in a story about how to spot fake or biased news found in March 2017 on Snapchat Discover. The story was in a Snapchat-first Discover platform called *Brother*. The stated market for *Brother* is Millennial males. There were some marked differences between the chart by Vanessa Otero and the chart found on *Brother*. The first major difference was that one chart was somewhat complex and the other was very simple. The second difference was the way ranking was depicted. However, the biggest difference—recognized immediately—were in the rankings. In Otero’s chart, news outlets such as NPR were in the center, depicting mainstream. And in the *Brother* graphic, NPR was placed towards the bottom in red, which represented being less trustworthy (see figure 2).

Surprisingly, on the chart in the Snapchat *Brother* story about recognizing fake news, NPR was two outlets away from the *Onion* satire site. This chart was presenting one side of a poll that was completed by the *Morning Consult*. If you read the original *Morning Consult* article you will find that “fifty-one percent of people said they consider National Public Radio to be credible, but the outlet might be affected by a lack of awareness. Seventeen percent of people said they had never heard of NPR” (Nichols 2016). When we look at *Brother*’s parent company, though, we can form an opinion about the bias of the source. According to Kurt Wagner, writing for *Recode* (which may, of course, have its own bias), *Brother* is the product of “Vertical Networks, a U.K.-based media company run by Elisabeth Murdoch, the daughter of 21st Century Fox Chairman Rupert Murdoch” (Wagner 2016).

## Media Literacy Teaching and Learning

Following the November 2016 presidential election, there was great concern in many quarters about fake news displaying on Facebook and popping up in Google searches. And then, in what seemed to be perfect timing, on November 22, 2016, a Stanford University team released the study *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*. The report conducted by Stanford History Education Group was an eighteen-month study that started well before the recent concerns about all the online fake news. The results of the study show that students all the way through college age are not employing the basics of evaluating a source (SHED 2016).

Librarians in schools should continue to teach students to evaluate all kinds of online material. The criteria that we have used for over a decade to evaluate websites can be used for all online sources, regardless of the format. Because our school ranges from sixth through

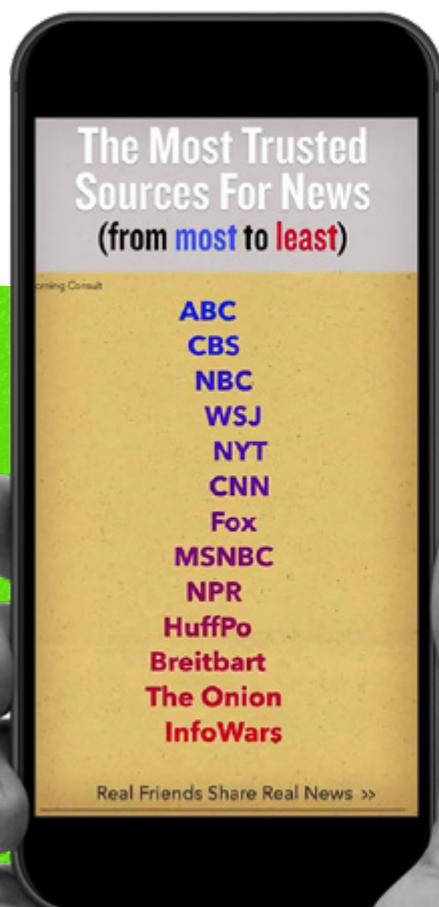


Figure 2. Ranking trustworthiness of news sources according to the Snapchat Discover platform *Brother* (March 2017).

twelfth grades, teaching media literacy requires that we remember to teach on a continuum. In the early years, we keep it simple. The acronym BAT helps students remember to check bias, the author, and the timeframe. As students get older the concepts become more detailed. The acronym CRAAP and the CRAAP evaluation criteria developed at California State University-Chico help students check for currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose. These concepts lead us into college-level reading and the more-complex topics from the Association of College and Research Library's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education; for instance, "Authority is constructed and contextual" (ACRL 2016, 4).

No matter what the formula, librarians must understand that teaching media literacy is not a static or one-time activity. The article "Flipside of Fake News: Appreciating Responsible Journalism" explores the ever-changing news literacy landscape (ProQuest 2017). Writing this feature for *KQ* spurred further research into the flipside of fake news: responsible journalism. Dr. Robert Byrd, a local professor in the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media at the University of Memphis, was kind enough to respond to requests for an interview about the journalist's perspective and the training of future journalists. Below are excerpts from the interview. The entire interview can be found on the *Knowledge Quest* blog. At the end of the interview, Dr. Byrd includes specific resources for K–12 librarians and teachers to teach students about news media (Byrd and Little 2018).

## How to Spot Responsible Journalism: An Interview

**HANNAH BYRD LITTLE:** As a professor of journalism, what do you consider to be the hallmarks of responsible journalism and how can the reader spot these very specific things?

**ROBERT BYRD:** The first principle in the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics is "seek truth and report it." That's what journalism is all about. Journalists abide by codes of ethics every day, but sometimes that means they may report on something that others may not want to hear. Sometimes the truth is ugly, or it puts someone on the hot seat. But we as journalists still have a public duty to publish that information.

Sometimes a reader's issue with spotting high-quality news over the shoddy news is his or her own biases. News shouldn't be disregarded just because we don't want to believe it to be true. Readers should disregard news only after some fact checking of their own. The first thing anyone should do after reading, watching, or listening to a news story is Google. Can they confirm the story with at least two other sources? Are there other sources that refute the story?

So much of the fake news from the last couple of years was just outright fake—totally made up. Photos were ripped from other stories; information was fabricated; sources were created out of thin air. That's completely different from real journalistic news. And so easy to spot.

For readers, they should be looking for actual news outlets. Do some research on the outlets that you're using so that you know the vast majority of what they produce is accurate and balanced. Readers should also look at sourcing. Most

journalists strive to include only verifiable information from credible sources. Information that can be confirmed by other sources. Most journalists rely on data produced by nonpartisan researchers. Journalists, according to the SPJ Code of Ethics, should be accountable and transparent, meaning we know their sources and they are standing by their work.

The problem with a lot of the fake news or fictional stories that are produced is that they were made to look like real news. Those stories weren't produced by actual journalists. Those stories were and are produced by non-journalists with an agenda. There was a really good story in the *New York Times* about the guy who fabricated the story about Hillary Clinton stealing ballots and hiding them in a storage container in Chicago. It's an interesting read—fascinating and scary (Shane 2017).

It all comes down to: If it sounds wrong, fact check it. If you don't know the source, find other sources to refute or confirm. Even if it's been shared 500,000 times on Facebook and your best friend posted it, investigate.

### *Intrigue without Compromising Accuracy*

**HBL:** How do you teach journalism students to be intriguing at the same time differentiating themselves from online sources that are either extremely biased or are titillating click-bait?

**RB:** This is a great question, one that we often talk about in journalism classes. How to write a headline that grabs attention but isn't sensational or misleading. Headline writing is an art. To be really good takes time and practice. Headlines are active, have keywords, tease the story without being sensational or salacious, give the reader an idea of the story before they click.

“Students need to learn early on how media works—not just news, but advertising, public relations, and film and television as well.”

I don't always think this is really the problem of journalists—they're well-trained. This is the work of media corporations. The more sensational, the more clicks, the more advertising dollars. This also isn't a new problem. Media history is filled with these kinds of sensational headlines that titillate readers but offer little in the way of public good.

I don't know that we can change the corporate mentality. I think this is a reader education moment. If we can educate readers to avoid headlines like this, the clicks reduce and so do the profits from stories like this. Also, we have to train readers to read beyond the headline. There's a ridiculous number of readers who only skim headlines for news and information—that's scary given some of the headlines out there.

### *Tools for K–12 Teachers and Librarians*

**HBL:** What tools can K–12 teachers and librarians use in their teaching to help students spot sloppy journalism and inaccurate news?

**RB:** Great question. I think media literacy should be a part of a K–12 curriculum. Students need to learn early on how media works—not just news, but advertising, public relations, and film and television

as well. That curriculum could be taught in a dedicated class or as part of social studies or media studies, but it definitely should be included.

For librarians and teachers, there are some good resources out there to teach students about the media:

- The *New York Times* has a teaching and learning site that offers lesson plans on almost any subject, and their news and information topics are great (“Learning Network” 2018). One lesson explores the subject we've been talking about here—spotting fake news (Schulten and Brown 2017).
- NIE (Newspapers in Education) is a great resource as well. A few of the national newspapers have dedicated NIE sites that help students understand and dissect what it is they're reading in the newspaper. The *Washington Post* has an NIE site that's great (“Curriculum Guides” 2018).
- PBS offers lesson plans that coincide with *PBS NewsHour*. Great for students to watch the programming, and then learn more about the stories and the production. Also, great for teachers because the lesson plans are designed for varying grade levels. PBS also has a lesson plan about recognizing fake news (Pasquantonio 2016).

Finally, I would say for all K–12 teachers and librarians, it is important that they educate themselves on the media as well. It's easy for all of us to fall prey to political rhetoric that demonizes the media, but our democracy is reliant on a strong, independent media. If we kill it because we've been duped into believing that it's evil and fake, we're most likely creating a society where the lines between fact and fiction are more and more distorted.



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