

ACRL Delaware Valley Chapter, Fall 2017 Program
**Fact, False, or Just Flawed:
Critically Examining News in the Age of Truthiness**

Session Report
Keynote Presentation

By Carol Howe, Science Librarian, Haverford College

Dr. Pamela Newkirk was our keynote speaker. She is an award winning journalist; a professor of journalism at New York University; and author of numerous books, including *Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga*.

Dr. Newkirk started off by saying that librarians are indispensable to her work; their work has advanced hers. She even likened librarians to “warriors of truth” or superheroes. She related to the audience that the mission of journalism has not changed, but it has become more daunting as information is now instantly disseminated and globally consumed. What’s more, readers may fail to distinguish news they get on Facebook versus news reported in *The New York Times*.

Dr. Newkirk talked about threats to legitimate journalism, including social media, saying that social media sites don’t have to disclose who paid for their advertisements as traditional news sources do. She noted that journalism is becoming data-driven—numbers of past clicks sometimes determine what gets published in the present. She lamented the fact that legitimate newspaper sales are the lowest they’ve been since 1945 and raised the notion that if legitimate news sources don’t survive, neither will democracy.

Dr. Newkirk talked about her book, *Spectacle*, which relates the true story of a Congolese man who was displayed in a bear cage at the Bronx Zoo. Ten years later, it was dismissed as urban legend. Reflecting on this, Dr. Newkirk noted how it raises questions about what we know, and what we think we know, about the past. Racism, she said, is embedded in scholarship. When asked her opinion on how to have difficult conversations, such as those about white privilege, she pointed to talking about history—such as what happened at the Bronx Zoo—as a way to engage. This can make the conversation dispassionate and unthreatening.

When asked her opinion about combating “fake” news, Dr. Newkirk offered some advice. She said to read widely and don’t place all your trust in one news source or newscaster. She is not a proponent of aggregated news—she prefers to know the source—and noted her favorite news sources as *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Guardian*. She also advocated for having skepticism. Finally, Dr. Newkirk stressed the importance of looking for counter narratives, including those from people who have been systemically racialized.

Dr. Newkirk’s talk was both inspiring and sobering. I think many in the audience would join me in wanting to hear more from this important figure in journalism.