ELISSA MALESPINA: THE FUTURE IS ABOUT HUMANS AND MACHINES WORKING TOGETHER

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This issue of *The Library* journal features an interview with Elissa Malespina, a school librarian from the USA, organizer of workshops on the implementation of digital technologies in libraries and schools and writer of a weekly newsletter *The AI School Librarians*. The aim of the interview is to present her views on the role of librarians in the post-factual era as society becomes increasingly polarised and on the importance of implementing and using AI tools including their relevance for inclusive education. In the interview, Malespina highlights the benefits of artificial intelligence for optimising work processes and argues that conflict between people and machines is not inevitable as the two can work together to greatly benefit everyone.

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Elissa Malespina is a school librarian dealing with various library and technology topics. In this regard, she gives presentations, organizes workshops and writes weekly newsletter The AI School Librarians. In the past, she has also worked with diverse student population which influenced her approach to the need for access to education and information. She is a supporter of intellectual freedom and promoter of the important role of school librarians in schools and in society.

▌**Let's start from the end. You currently provide consultancy and organize workshops aimed at introducing AI tools into school and library environments. Considering constantly expanding possibilities of using AI, it can be assumed that the atendees' interest in this topic is great. However, I would like to know what problems or specific situations you have encountered so far – either in libraries or at schools.**

Keeping up with AI is a real challenge; it's constantly evolving, and new developments emerge at a rapid pace. It's difficult to even introduce the latest tools to people because by the time I do, there's already something newer on the horizon! So, I've shifted my focus from teaching specific tools to teaching adaptable strategies that remain effective regardless of the technology.

I also address the concerns surrounding AI's potential for both positive and negative impacts. While AI offers promising opportunities in education, such as personalized learning and increased efficiency, it also raises ethical considerations like bias, privacy, and job displacement. However, by proactively addressing these concerns and focusing on responsible AI use, we can navigate this evolving landscape and harness AI's potential for good.

As a teacher and librarian, you have also worked with ethnically, economically and socially diverse student population. In what way has this experience influenced your perception of inclusivity in education? Is its implementation sustainable in the constantly changing digital age?

My experience working with diverse students as a teacher and librarian, along with my advocacy work in special education and educational technology, has shaped my strong belief in inclusive educa-

tion. I've seen firsthand how technology, especially AI, can change the game for students who need extra support. AI can break down language barriers for English Language Learners with instant translation, adjust text complexity for students with special needs, and provide real-time closed captioning for the hearing impaired. These tools used to be expensive and out of reach for many schools, but now they're often free or much more affordable.

Cost was a big barrier for schools trying to provide resources for diverse learners, but AI-powered platforms like Diffit, Magic School, and ChatGPT are changing that by offering these services at little to no cost. This means all students, no matter their background or ability, can get a good education.

Using AI in education isn't just about convenience; it's about creating a truly inclusive space where every student feels seen, heard, and valued. With AI, there is the potential to build a future where education is fair and accessible to everyone.

▌**In your articles, you have long pointed out the need for the presence of a librarian in the school environment. In one of the articles from**

2016, you stated that „...*a school library without a librarian should not even be called a library...*“ (Malespina 2016). **What specifically is lacking in schools that do not have a school library and an adequately educated librarian?**

There is so much lacking and missing when a school does not have a librarian. In today's digital age, where misinformation and deepfakes are rampant, the role of a school librarian is more crucial than ever. Librarians are trained information specialists who can equip students with the skills to navigate the complexities of the modern information landscape. They can teach students how to critically evaluate sources, identify bias, and distinguish between credible information and misinformation. By providing students with these essential skills, librarians empower them to become discerning consumers of information and responsible digital citizens.

Libraries are also welcoming spaces for all students, no matter their sexual orientation, religion, race, or income level. They offer a wide variety of books, helping students find stories they connect with and feel like they belong. This inclusive environment is key for personal growth and helps fight discrimination, making the library a safe place where everyone feels valued.

Is there anything in which the librarians' position in the education of children and youth has changed significantly over the last ten years?

School libraries were once safe spaces for learning and growing, but now they're caught in the middle of cultural battles. Books, which used to be seen as tools for understanding different perspectives, are now considered dangerous by some. People are worried that certain books might make some students uncomfortable, and this has led to censorship and silencing of marginalized voices. This creates a climate of fear and intimidation that not only affects librarians but also the students they're supposed to help.

These attacks on intellectual freedom have had a chilling effect. Librarians, who used to be strong advocates for the right to read, are now hesitant to select certain books because they're afraid of backlash. I know this firsthand because I lost my job for having book displays about racial diversity and LGBTQ+ topics, which my principal thought made some students uncomfortable.

In Slovakia, libraries have been financially undersized for a long time, but despite this, their importance in educating users in the use of digital technologies is constantly pointed out. Can these expectations be met at all, if we take into account that many, especially smaller libraries, have a problem with ensuring even reliable desktop computers and Wi-Fi connection?

To foster widespread enthusiasm and adoption of AI and emerging technologies, we must first prioritize and address fundamental issues such as inadequate internet connectivity and outdated hardware. These seemingly mundane problems create significant user frustration and hinder the successful implementation and utilization of new technologies. While investments in initiatives such as comprehensive library funding and ensuring access to up-to-date technology may not generate the same level of excitement as the latest AI advancements, they are nonetheless crucial for creating an environment where technology is both accessible and enjoyable for all users.

Despite the problems mentioned, more and more Slovak libraries are interested in creating smartlabs equipped with various digital technologies, including ozobots, mbots, 3D and sublimation printers or virtual reality. In addition, several are beginning to focus intensively on the expansion of the AI into our everyday lives. Are smartlabs widespread in US libraries?

Libraries are increasingly adding smartlabs and makerspaces, giving people access to advanced technology and resources. These spaces allow for hands-on learning and experimentation, encouraging creativity and innovation in the community.

Schools are also starting to see the educational value of makerspaces and are adding them to their libraries. By making these labs part of the curriculum, schools can help students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and technical skills.

The focus should be on the purpose and educational goals of these spaces, not on specific tools and technologies, which can quickly become outdated. The true value is in providing access to resources and encouraging a culture of learning and exploration. By prioritizing the underlying purpose of makerspaces, libraries and schools can make sure these spaces stay relevant and impactful for a long time.

MGR. ZUZANA STRUHÁRIKOVÁ, PHD.

How are US libraries doing in terms of integrating AI tools into work processes of their employees? Are there any interesting practical examples that we could be inspired by in Slovakia?

AI has totally changed so many industries, and libraries are no exception. AI tools are incredibly versatile and can be used for so many things. I've personally used AI to streamline a ton of tasks and make my workflow way more efficient.

One area where AI has been a game-changer is content creation. Coming up with engaging social media content every day can take a lot of time, but AI can handle it in a snap. This lets me keep our social media active and interesting without spending hours on it.

Reader advisory is another area where AI shines. With AI-powered tools, I can quickly create short and informative book summaries that get students excited about new books. This saves me time and makes our library's collection more accessible and appealing.

Communication is key for any librarian, and AI can make it a lot easier and faster. Whether it's writing emails, newsletters, or parent communications, AI can help create professional and effective messages, making sure that everyone stays informed and engaged.

In a school, where one librarian often serves tons of students and staff, AI can be a lifesaver. By automating routine tasks, streamlining workflows, and making things easier overall, AI lets librarians focus on more important things, like encouraging a love of reading, teaching information literacy, and giving personalized support to students and teachers.

What would you say to a librarian who is still hesitating whether it makes sense to start using AI and getting educated in this field?

AI is already a part of our everyday lives, even if we don't always realize it. Think spell check, word prediction, smartphones, smartwatches, Alexa – they all use AI and have become essential. AI isn't going away; it's only going to grow. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the rapid changes, so start small. Find a tool like MagicSchool AI or ChatGPT that can do a lot of different things and just start experimenting. See how it can simplify your work and make your life easier. I'm all about using AI to work smarter, not harder.

AI tools can help you optimize your work, be more productive, and focus on the strategic and creative aspects of your job. The goal is to use AI to enhance

ELISSA MALESPINA: THE FUTURE IS ABOUT HUMANS AND MACHINES WORKING TOGETHER

your skills and achieve better results. As AI techno-logy continues to develop, staying open to learning and adapting will be essential. The future isn't about humans versus machines, it's about humans and machines working together to accomplish more than either could alone.

As a society, we are facing challenges related to post-factuality, polarization, intolerance, lack of respect, or increase in anxiety as a result of these negative phenomena. What role do librarians play in this regard, potentially facing censorship and political pressures related to their funding and employment?

Librarians play a crucial role in combating the challenges of post-factuality, polarization, and intolerance. They are the gatekeepers of knowledge, providing access to diverse perspectives and reliable information. In the face of censorship and political pressures, librarians must stand firm in their commitment to intellectual freedom and open access to information.
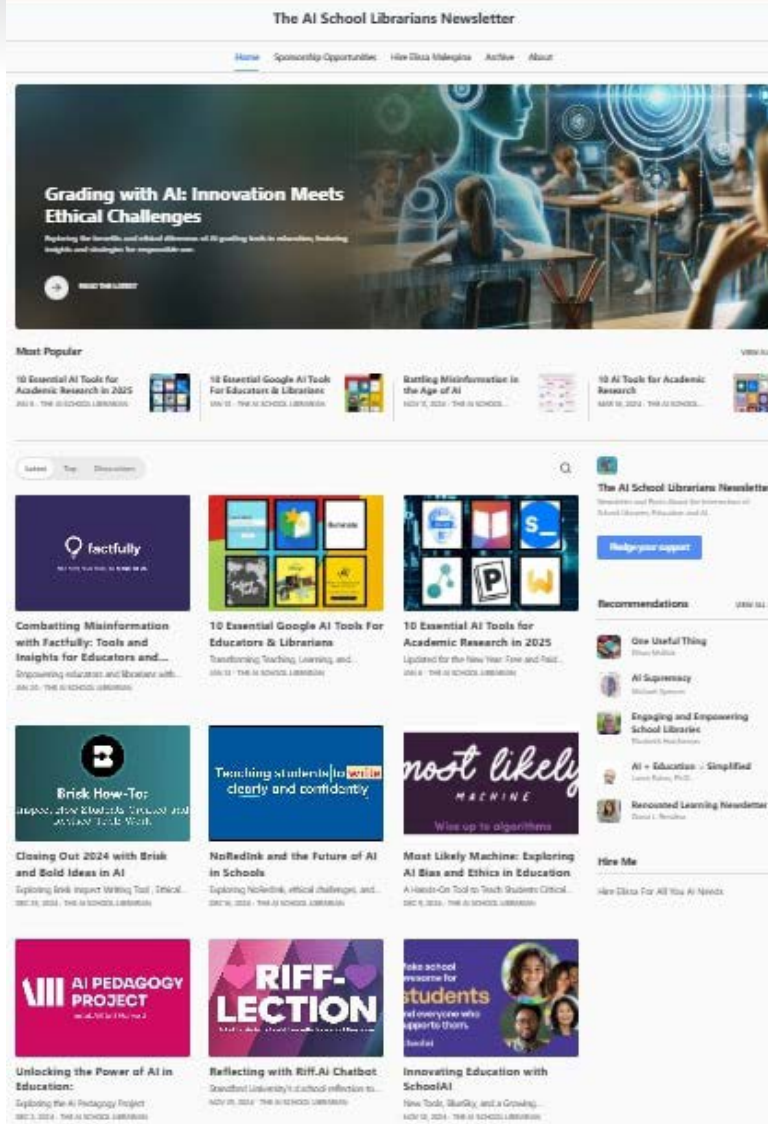
When governments attempt to control information, democracy is threatened. Librarians have a responsibility to resist such efforts and ensure that citizens have the resources they need to make informed decisions and participate fully in society. By promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and open dialogue, librarians can empower individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern information landscape and contribute to a more just and equitable society.

Finally, I would like to know what you are currently working on and what your next professional plans are.

I'm currently a full-time school librarian in an urban school district, where I'm working to revitalize the school's library and programs after a period without a dedicated librarian. My role includes writing

THE AI SCHOOL LIBRARIANS NEWSLETTER

a weekly *The AI School Librarians* newsletter and giving presentations and workshops on different library and technology topics. I'll also be presenting on AI Ethics at the upcoming ISTE conference.

In my free time, I help special education families in the community get the services and support they need and advocate for educational issues like censorship and book banning. I'm a strong believer in intellectual freedom and access to diverse perspectives in education.

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MGR. ZUZANA STRUHÁRIKOVÁ, PHD.