

MEDIA LITERACY VS. SPIN DOCTORS AND FAKE NEWS

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Abstract: In the last two decades, the growth of the internet has been spectacular in every field of contemporary society. The impact of digital media was without precedents. Consumers can be at the same time producers and can directly address a large number of potential users. The effects of this revolution are not only positive. The availability of large volumes of data on the internet and the possibility to spread information worldwide have also negative consequences. The internet can give to spin doctors and various types of manipulators the opportunity to disseminate around meaningless and trivial opinions as well as fake information. This paper focuses on how digital education within media literacy can prevent the negative consequences related to digital media. Digital education is a potent means for contrasting some emerging issues such as the increasing spread of online haters, trolls, and fake news.

Key words: Ethics, Media literacy, Power, Spin doctors, Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction: Digital media issues

At the end of 1900s, the notions of *multiliteracies* was introduced to embrace all the contemporary forms of literacy as well as the new forms of digital communication (Buckingham, 2010). In fact, with the advent of digital technologies, people faced with unprecedented opportunities and a wide range of alternatives to search for and produce information.

Many things are changed from the time when Maddison, surprised of the richness and variety of media education, argued that it could enable the excellent teacher to illumine relationships between education and its social, cultural, ethical, economic and political dimensions in a way difficult to parallel in other curricular disciplines (Maddison, 1977).

Nowadays, the fast development of digital technologies and the disruptive spread of internet connections had produced relevant changes in the way people communicate and, accordingly, in the way they can express and disseminate their opinions. Technology has enabled not only individuals but also private companies and government institutions, as well as intelligent programs, to generate massive volumes of information that can be disseminated to a broad audience. The repercussion is that digital communications have, today, the potentiality to influence a large part of the population. Moreover, due to the relative anonymity of the internet, the use of an offensive language against adversaries has growth and people found in social networks a new means to spread around their rage and aggressivity.

As a consequence, nowadays, media literacy cannot ignore two main issues that are often closely connected: online misinformation and online hate. Misinformation and hate are old questions, but the internet give them a new and disquieting relevance.

Nevertheless, the internet can favor the democratic participation of citizens supporting collaborative and participatory decision making (Kaner, 2014; Afzalan, Sanchez & Evans-Cowley, 2017) but participatory processes can also be used to manipulate citizens distorting the facts, spreading around biased opinions, and amplyfing propaganda (Hadžialić, S. 2016). Indeed, social media control information and news through software algorithms filtering what “people need.” The power of social media and new people attitudes towards them have been gloomily interpreted as follows: *As more and more people become alienated from traditional religion, we look to Google as our immediate, all-knowing oracle of answers from trivial to profound. Google is our modern-day god. Google appeals to the brain, offering knowledge to everyone, regardless of background or education level. If you have a smartphone or an Internet connection, your prayers will always be answered: “Will my kid be all right?” “Symptoms and treatment of croup. . .” “Who might attack us?” “Nations with active nuclear-weapons programs . . .”* (Galloway, 2018).

2. Digital misinformation

The massive spread of digital misinformation has been identified as a significant global risk (Howell, 2014). Although, by understanding the impact of media on society, media literacy prevents us in becoming dependent on the media. Or to at least it enables us to control the selection method, the method of reading and making appropriate decisions based on the “reading” of the media that are available to us. The using and abusing of the new media and the availability of different information to everyone at any time and in any way possible within the multimedia availability of new media certainly shows how much more needs to be done on improving the education of all individuals, regardless of their social, racial, ethnic, and / or political status, and above all because society aims towards further development of direct and immediate democratic consciousness.

Fabricated news is not a new phenomenon. The Prologue to Shakespeare’s Henry IV Part 2 (written ~ 1599) is spoken by Rumour, the personification of hearsay, by a figure dressed in a costume full of tongues. In the 20th century, propaganda plaid a relevant role, particularly during wartime and in nazi-fascist regimes. Indeed, propaganda was largely funded and controlled by totalitarian governments.

Propaganda was central to Nazi Germany (Bytwerk, 2012) and Goebbels used propaganda to condition and convince people, getting them to believe in the values and ideas of the Nazis. Here following the main Nazis' propaganda messages:

- The purity of the race (Aryan)
- The greatness of Germany
- The Führer cult

Hoaxes and falsehoods have been associated with the internet since its early days but only in the last few years, misinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by governments, have emerged and their effect on democracy and society have been analyzed (Gaughan, 2016; McNair, 2017; Morgan, 2018).

Social media are a powerfull means to access, analyze, evaluate, and transmit messages using the digital technology but they also can create particularly fertile grounds for sowing disinformation. Accordingly, media literacy should not only support how the access to

information on the internet but all support critical attitudes to distinguish between information and propaganda..

It is not a casual that the term *fake news* as a favorite term of Donald Trump was named 2017's word of the year (Titcomb & Carson, 2018).

In fact, some misinformation became viral on Facebook during the last US election:

- "Pope backs Trump"
- "Hillary sold weapons to ISIS"
- "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead"

Although the sentence, "If facts contradict to my theory, the worse for the facts," has been attributed to the famous German philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, within the world of 21st Century we can see a lot of examples of that phrase hidden under the two magic words of "populism" and "alternative facts", i.e. so call "truth" within the fake news.

The main types of fake news are (PEN America, 2017):

- Sensational content: their key goal is to drive web traffic and, as a result, generate advertising income
- Nation state-sponsored misinformation: their goal is to influence public opinion
- Hyper-partisan news and commentary: their goal is to combine, often disparate, facts and opinions to support one political viewpoint or party
- Swarms of posts on social media: their goal is disseminating doctored or misleading photos, videos, and messages on social media

Social media companies such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google have all announced measures to crack down on misinformation online. Facebook claimed to be engaged in implementing fact checkers to flag disputed stories, cutting off advertising revenue to fake news sites, and better-reviewing adverts on the site. Twitter declared that it has become better at dealing with bots, and Google has promised better algorithms to police YouTube.

However, at the moment, the better suggestions to spot fake news are:

- Check the and compare several sources of given information
- Check the author
- Check the date
- Read beyond
- Ask experts
- Repeat everything above once more

Journalists are not neutral, as stated in the book "Elements of Journalism" (Kovach & Rosentiel, 2001) since the newspaper owners can influence them. However, journalists who want to respect professional ethical standards must avoid wandering into arrogance, elitism, isolation or nihilism when implementing their form of independence. At the same time, without integrity, journalism is suspicious and unreliable, and can not be trusted within its appearance. Honesty gives the reporter the authority to investigate questions, "cast light" on "dark places" and to dig up where others will not. As mentioned earlier, information aimed for the development of a democratic society of different subjects of political pluralism, it is of the

utmost importance that the public debate focuses on honest, trustworthy professional journalism.

Professional ethical standards must stimulate moral imagination, recognize behavioral rules in ethical issues, and direct the subjects of political pluralism to work on the development of analytic abilities, as well as work on acquiring the sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility with the expressed tolerance on disagreement, that is, with a simple vocabulary said - it must work on acquiring an ethical condition. Most of all because ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with moral behavior issues. Lawyers and judges tell us that the laws are within the foundation of our civilization. They are not right and that is not true, and here we emphasize that - *The foundations of our culture(s) lies in moral respect for the laws.*

What is the function of the media in the system of professional ethical standards? Mass media are among the most influential companies in a democratic society (especially social networks in XXI century), at the crossroads between citizens and their political, economic and social institutions.

How can we overcome the problems faced by journalism when faced with a situation of overwhelming social networks? Rumor problems, manipulation of disinformation, lies, deception and hypocrisy of politicians who are even ready to change the laws if it suits them personally or in other words - to adapt legislation to their own interests and thus directly or indirectly usurp all the possibilities for forming a deliberative society democracy which may be the only outlet not only for the local areas of South East Europe, but also for the wider, global meaning of that word.

This is something that, when social networks are concerned, also pointed out by the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg in his FB status on 19.11.2016:

Bearing in mind that the problem of disinformation and false (fake) news is a technical and philosophical complex, the most important is the discovery of a specific area to handle. In that sense, Facebook is working on a better detection system.

3. Online hate

Online hate is a devastating phenomenon. Indeed, the cyber world is populated by a multitude of haters who post angry and/or uninformed comments about a topic with the intent of harming someone, usually the author of a post or another person who posted a comment (Delaney & Madigan, 2016).

It has been observed that the term *hater* likely began with the expression “Hater gonna hate” from hip-hop culture (Reagle, 2015).

- Maggie Haberman, a famous American journalist, explained why she decided to leave twitter as follows:
- *I woke up last Sunday morning feeling anxiety in my chest as I checked the Twitter app on my phone, scrolling down to refresh, refresh, refresh. There was a comment I started to engage with — I opened a new post, tapped out some words, then thought better of it and deleted the tweet. The same thing happened repeatedly for the next two hours.*

The evening before, I had complained to a close friend that I hated being on Twitter. It was distorting discourse, I said. I couldn't turn off the noise. She asked what was the worst that could happen if I stepped away from it.

There was nothing I could think of. And so just after 6 p.m. last Sunday, I did. After nearly nine years and 187,000 tweets, I have used Twitter enough to know that it no longer works well for me. I will re-engage eventually, but in a different way. (The New York Times, July 20, 2018).

Flaming comments are top-rated on the internet. They are derogatory messages that don't contain any constructive feedback or any improving ideas, but a bunch of swearing, hateful and harmful comments. People who post this type of messages are called the haters. A hater can be defined as someone who posts a negative comment that doesn't offer any helpful information but contains offenses and insults.

Flaming is indeed a severe issue that is currently happening in the online world and has been present from the first online applications that provided people with the opportunity to express their opinions and comments.

To contrast online hate speech, in 2013, the Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention and Mobocracy launched the Hatebase project based on a crowdsourcing approach (Silva, Mondal, Correa, Benevenuto, & Weber, 2016; Mondal, Silva & Benevenuto, 2017). It aims to collect worldwide hate terms and expressions in an online repository. Users can add terms and contribute to increasing the database content. At the moment, Hatebase is the world's largest online repository of structured multilingual, usage-based hate speech. Core components of the Hatebase application are HateBot, a robot which interacts with external APIs to retrieve potential sightings, and HateBrain, a linguistic parser which automates some of the tasks of identifying hate speech acquired by HateBot. Figure 1 shows the most common hate speech.

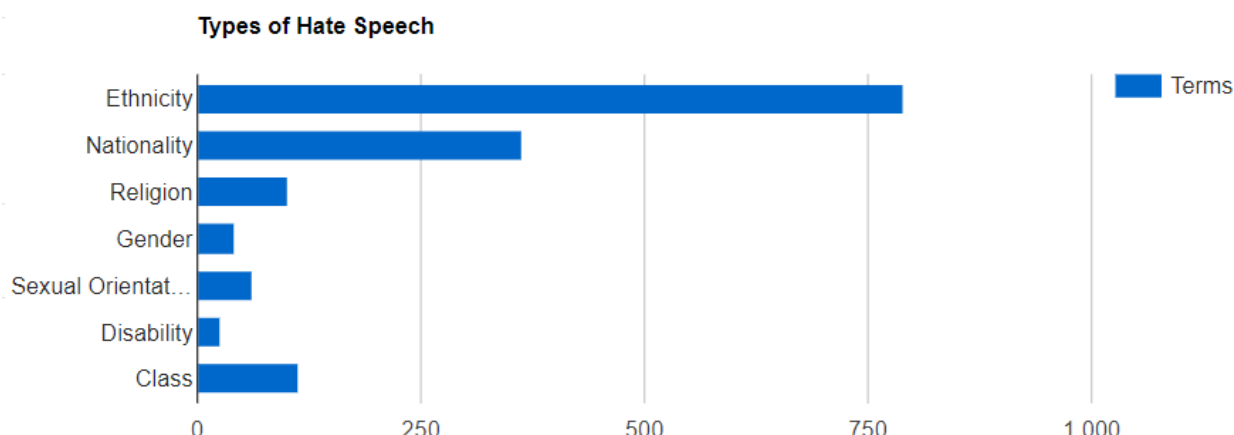


Figure 1. The most common hate speech (source: <https://www.hatebase.org/popular>, October 2018).

Angry comments can also be posted by infiltrated scammers and trolls. Trolling is a term used to address who deliberately try to distress someone online but to disrupt and often anonymously. Comments can be used to manipulate others users through scams and fakery or to alienate an individual or more often a group of people. Haters hit on not only politicians, celebrities, journalists, bloggers, public figures but also ordinary internet users. Nowadays, to receive insults is the price people pay for being visible online, especially if women.

4. Digital media education

The selection of trustworthy materials requires expert knowledge and expertise that, usually, many users don't possess. Indeed, digital technologies make some things possible and facilitate many others but, at the same time, introduce new limitations and unintended issues. For instance, online participatory processes open new problems related to the coordination and synchronization of multiple interactions.

Moreover, learning processes can be negatively affected by an inappropriate use of learning analytics and forms of dataveillance according to an intensified a culture of managerialism within education. On this purpose, Selwyng observes:

The downside of the use of data for „learning analytica“ and personalization is that teachers and students become increasingly aware of being tracked and watched, and then alter their behavior accordingly. Behavior can become „self-governing“ and „self-regulated“ – conforming to what people perceive to be the norm, and therefore diminish the individuality of flexibility of education. (Selwyng, 2016, 99)

According to the current literature and suggestions of expert (Martens & Hobbs, 2015; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Shen, Kasra, Pan, Bassett, Malloch & O'Brien, 2018), as well as our on field experience, a basic digital media education program should include:

- Basic theoretical knowledge and practical skills finalized to use and manage the various forms of digital media.
- Theoretical and practical skills to search on the internet for information.

- Thorough knowledge of social networking applications, messengers application, and interactive tools.
- Thorough knowledge of digital media policies and legal aspects.
- Competences to deal with the impact and identification fake news and fabricated information.

However, there is one more thing which we cannot avoid at all, when we are talking about the truth within one society, regardless about which ideological array it is about. Namely, Martin Luther back in ~ 1530 (Mayer & Hinchman, 2002) sealed off the end of visual culture of the metaphysical era, in which the people have not been reminded on divine order through the listening of Latin articles but through the watching of the painted biblical messages with the saying: “Christ’s kingdom is the kingdom of listening, and not the kingdom of watching.” But, the speculator of today, who, under the impression of slashing universalism of its culture, proclaimed and founded revisualization of the communication culture as the promise of the future, was the Hungarian artist Bela Balasz (1924-1930). He underlined the visual as the new truth, and it is visible that we have anesthesia of the social order as domination of visual in comparison with what is in written and/or spoken word. Today, 90 % of information that goes towards our brain is visual and we are getting to the social media that encircles visualization with written and spoken word within virtual reality. Sometimes we really do need to ask ourselves the question: Is our real world really the real world or is it within a virtual online world?

Although, Media literacy in regards new media empowers people, as mentioned in the 21st Century Literacy summit, back in 2005:

Of course, the new media are guiding us to have abilities and skills to understand where visual, hearing, and digital literacy is intercepted. This includes the ability to understand the power of picture and sound, recognition, and the need for that power, to be able manipulate and transform digital media, and to be able to distribute them by spreading, and to be more easily adapted to new forms.

5. Conclusion

Media culture within the new digital media *eo ipso* is the result of further development of industrialization (i.e. globalization) of information and culture. The mechanism of media democracy, just as Thomas Meyer (2002) says works...*through the mutual play of institutional structures of opportunities, economic interests and cultural dispositions.*

Images, sounds and spectacles help in the production of weaving of living, where we have the dominant time of leisure, during which the political views and social behaviors are shaped, in which the material is ensured from which people itself falsify, very often, their identities.

When we talk about literacy in today's, digitally overwhelmed digital society of new media, intertwined with traditional forms of exclusive consciousness - being literate means being engaged, active, critical, and create users not only from the written and spoken language, but

also from the visual language of the film and television, and above all, the new media. Visual communication is part of weaving of modern life ((Hadžialić, 2010).

Research on the cultural impacts of digital technology is quite recent and it will be necessary to collect and analyze a greater volume of data to achieve some evidences and overcome current biases.

To define the effective way for digital media literacy we need to understand the online social behavior and accept that it is part of the general social behavior of people. However, to design and intervene with digital media education programs we cannot wait until theoretical knowledge is complete. We risk waiting indefinitely.

In fact, misinformation can threaten the people confidence in institutions and potentially could even undermine the long-term health of a nation's democracy.

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