

Editorial: Digital Literacy, Fake News and Education

The COST IS1401 report on Digital Literacy and Education (Brites, 2017) addressed, across Europe, a set of fundamental questions:

A revolution is going on at the very moment you read these words and you are repeatedly participating in it every time you log in. As with every revolution, the digital one started from a passion, a vision, an urgency to spread, and the promise of qualitative changes to come. One such change was the recent declaration of the United Nations (2016) on considering internet access a basic human right. How spread is this right across Europe? Is it the case that the digital is fundamentally changing literacy? What is the landscape of digital literacy and education interactions across European countries? What challenges does digital literacy pose to education in Europe? (Brites, 2017)

Since the report was published, the issue of 'fake news' has been high on the agenda for media and digital literacy academics, teachers, journalists and researchers. The need for education to offer a preventative antidote to the dangers of fake news has been in the public discourse. Recently, the European Commission (EC) published a report on effective media literacy education practices to address disinformation (McDougall, Zezulcova, van Driel and Sternadel, 2018) and shared the findings in Brussels at a policy-facing event on 'Strengthening Common European Values through Education'. In the same time-frame, UNESCO produced a handbook for journalism education (Ireton and Prosetti, 2018) on the same theme and convened a panel at the end of the year at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University.

As editors of this special issue, having been involved in the COST IS1401 - European Literacy Network, its research reports and training events and, between us a significant range of further initiatives on this issue in the last two years, our collaboration here seeks to collect and publish empirical work from the field of digital literacy and to frame this research in the context of resilience to fake news. Whilst the COST reports that initiated this focus on Europe, this special issue publishes research from a broader international scope, from different geographies and cultural and social backgrounds. Digital literacy, in the context of media literacy, is one of the focus of *Cultura y Educación*, that treats often issues related with education and methodologies, also aspects that can be identified in this special issue.

But what is fake news?

The EC's High Level Expert Group on the topic recently concluded that 'disinformation' is a better term for the problem, and the UNESCO Handbook cited above has been published with a cross through 'Fake News' in the title. So, we accept it's a problematic idea and thus use it 'under erasure' (Derrida, 1976) and this contested concept cannot be understood in abstraction from its political, cultural and economic contexts.

The global economic crash, a decade on, has clearly caused seismic political shifts and the polarization of public discourse can be traced back to this, according to Adam Tooze, who presents

his account of the last ten years as “both economic analysis and political horror story” (Penguin, 2019).

‘Fake news’ has, for long time, a number of ‘sub-genres’ – from click-bait to mal-information – and it is nothing new (see Posetti and Matthews’ timeline *From Antony and Cleopatra to Cambridge Analytica*, 2018). What is new, however, is the scale and speed of ‘fake news’ now in the context of the destabilization of the mainstream media – this state of *information disorder* is a current phenomenon. Also new are the powerful intersections, in this era of austerity-caused polarity, between disinformation and oppressive practices, racism, misogyny, the exploitation of the vulnerable, the discursive power of partisanship. The convergence of oppressive intent and information disorder leads us all to a state of confusion:

What is common to the Brexit campaign, the US election and the disturbing depths of YouTube is that it is ultimately impossible to tell who is doing what, or what their motives and intentions are. It’s futile to attempt to discern between what’s algorithmically generated nonsense or carefully crafted fake news for generating ad dollars; what’s paranoid fiction, state action, propaganda or Spam; what’s deliberate misinformation or well-meaning fact check. (Bridle, 2018: ch 9, para 51)

Perhaps, in this point is where digital literacy is most needed, not necessarily to distinguish truth from falsity, or to distinguish between the sub-categories of fake news or its motivations, but to read all digital media with the kinds of skeptical resilience that are generated by critical literacy.

Of course, we must also accept that ‘fake news’ is something of an empty signifier, to be loaded with whichever discourse it is evoked to serve. The European Commission state “Print press organisations and broadcasters are in the process of intensifying their efforts to enforce certain trust enhancing practices... ensuring the highest levels of compliance with ethical and professional standards to sustain a pluralistic and trustworthy news media ecosystem” (European Commission, 2018: 41). But Alan Rusbridger, ex Guardian editor in the UK, observes “journalism is facing an existential economic threat in the form of a tumultuous recalibration of our place in the world. And on both sides of an increasingly scratchy debate about media, politics, and democracy, there is a hesitancy about whether there is any longer a common idea of what journalism is and why it matters.” (Rusbridger, 2018: 4). On the other hand, these mainstream policy and media industry perspectives are challenged forcefully by media lens:

The source of ‘fake news’ is not only the trollism, or the likes of Fox News, or Donald Trump, but a journalism self-appointed with a false respectability, a ‘liberal’ journalism that claims to challenge corporate state power but in reality courts and protects it. (Edwards and Cromwell, 2018: xii)

The articles we disseminate in this special issue address the educational response to these complex cultural challenges in specific contexts, asking the two key questions we posed in our call – concerning the difference that digital makes to literacy and, following on, the difference digital literacy makes to fake news.

The collection opens with an invited article by David Buckingham, an adapted reproduction of his recent blog posts and keynote speeches on this subject. The article offers an important, nuanced framing for the issue, situating fake news within the broader context of the breakdown of trust in the public sphere, long-standing practices of media education in addressing bias and representation and the importance of digital literacy 'seeing the bigger picture'. As Buckingham has been such an important, critical agent in this debate so far, we see the inclusion of this adapted article as a vital positioning for this contribution to new knowledge on this topic.

Ana Pérez-Escoda, Rosa García-Ruiz and Ignacio Aguaded give us as a wider view on digital literacy approaches. They contemplate the necessity of seeing digital literacy as an educational priority, placing its relevance at the policy level. Taking in consideration previous research and initiatives, the authors propose four dimensions to define digital literacy.

Besides these two articles, with a broader and conceptual view on the issues of 'fake news' and digital literacy, other articles stress on specific points of these two dimensions. Alfonso Gutiérrez-Martín, Alba Torrego-González and Miguel Vicente-Mariño validate the existence of an easy context for the spreading of 'fake news' on YouTube (along with other online places), potentiated by commercial interests, 'clickbaits' and 'I like' random actions. María-Carmen Ricoy, Cristina Sánchez-Martínez and Tiberio Feliz-Murias worked on the issues of credibility and falseness of online news. The authors point to problems of online credibility, but also to positive aspects of the news coverage, contributing also to an optimistic debate on questions of trust and the online news. Paloma Contreras-Pulido, Luís Miguel Romero-Rodríguez and Amor Pérez-Rodríguez reflect on "Media competencies of university professors and students. Comparison of levels in Spain, Portugal, Brazil and Venezuela", taking note of essential skills to act in a digital world in a critical form. The authors demonstrated the "need to develop transversal actions for instructing both university professors and students in media competences to face an ecosystem dominated by fake news and disinformation, as well as public policies directed at improving these skills among citizens at large." Also working with an university level sample, Christian Tarchi worked on "Identifying fake news through trustworthiness judgments of documents". Since the author confirmed that trustworthiness was a very important factor for the Italian students to read information on vaccination, arguments for the need to take efforts in promoting student's involvement with the subject to enhance their interest. Jesús Conde-Jiménez, Alejandro Tapia Frade and David Varona Aramburu used as well with a sample of university students from Spain on issues of credibility of internet news. This research pointed to a student's difficulties in establishing truthfulness of news sources. Finally, Julio-César Mateus, Wilson Hernández-Breña and Mònica Figueras-Maz give another dimension to the special issue. Considering that it is fundamental to work on the teacher's competences to improve issues of media literacy and citizenship with students, they worked on an instrument for making diagnostics to orient teachers, professors and education policy makers.

Looking forward to the future, this special issue points out some conceptual forms of looking at the contexts of 'fake news' and digital literacy and also presents very different types of research points of view and methodologies that can be inspiration for future work in the field. Without the intention

of being exhaustive, we consider that there are still a considerable number of side issues that were not covered by this special issue, but that can be of relevance for future research. Considering these two axes, there is the need to think about contexts of childhood and teenagers, intergenerational interaction, disadvantage communities, journalistic commitments and the subject of data driven knowledge, among others.

Julian McDougall (Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University); Maria José Brites, Maria João Couto (University of Vigo) and Catarina Lucas

References

Bridle, J. (2018). *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. London: Verso.

Brites, M. J. (Coord.) (2017). Digital Literacy and Education (2014-July 2016), national reports (Portugal, UK, Ireland, Spain, Serbia and Italy), ELN - European Literacy Network, Digital Literacy Team (WG2). Retrieved from <https://www.is1401eln.eu/en/gca/index.php?id=149>

Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology*. New York: Johns Hopkins Press.

Edwards, D. and Cromwell, D. (2018). *Propaganda Blitz: How the Corporate Media Distort Reality*. London: Pluto Press.

European Commission (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High level Group on fake news and online disinformation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Ireton, C. and Posetti, J. (eds) (2018). *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. Paris: Unesco.

McDougall, J., Zezulková, M., van Driel, B. and Sternadel, D. (2018). *'Teaching media literacy in Europe: evidence of effective school practices in primary and secondary education', NESET II report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Posetti, J. and Matthews, A. (2018). *A short guide to the history of 'fake news' and disinformation*. Washington, D. C.: International centre for Journalists. Retrieved from https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20History%20of%20Fake%20News%20and%20Disinformation_ICFJ%20Final.pdf

Rusbridger, A. (2018) Who Broke the News? The Guardian: 31.8.18. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/31/alan-rusbridger-who-broke-the-news>

Tooze, A. (2018). *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*. London: Random House.