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Digital Literacy and Propaganda

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Special Issue Editors

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The word “propaganda” has a long history and a bad reputation. For many, it connotes both the ravages of the Holocaust and of oppression under Communism. Although the original use of the term referred to the missionary work of the 17th century Catholics aiming to stem the tide of Protestantism, its meaning was reshaped in the 20th century during World War I when propaganda was used to stir nations to world war. Under the Third Reich, all forms of media were used to shape and control public opinion, stifle dissent and promote hatred that led to genocide. As consumer culture developed in the late 20th century, popular culture and advertising brought materialist values to the masses and public relations professionals developed advanced techniques to influence journalistic practice, ensuring that business and corporate interests were prominently featured in public discourse.

Today, propaganda is a part of everyone’s daily life both online and offline. It may take the form of partisan news, clickbait, advertising, sponsored content, hoaxes, conspiracy theories or pseudoscience. Propaganda comes out of the mouths of elected political leaders who may (or may not) lie with impunity. When propaganda is used to attack opponents, it can promote mistrust and hatred. All over the world, we see the dangerous consequences of propaganda when it is used as a tool of political power.

With the rise of the Internet and digital culture, propaganda has become increasingly personalized. As algorithms built for the purpose of delivering online advertising offer up an endless supply of persuasion, entertainment and information, propaganda is becoming highly responsive to user behavior. It is also more deeply relational, as family and friends deliver personalized propaganda through social media platforms. Like it or not, propaganda has become a seamless part of everyday life, offering people the comfort of confirming their existing allegiances and beliefs through the dissemination of slogans, memes, images and ideas that reinforce their existing world views.

But propaganda’s bad reputation obscures an important reality: it is also essential for democracy. Propagandists may choose to be deeply ethical, using a combination of emotion and information to create social, political and cultural change. Many young activists who have risen to prominence recently, including Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan or Greta Thunberg, the climate change activist who began her work at age 15, use the power of positive propaganda to inspire and engage people around the world. Propaganda can be understood as a form of effective communication that activates strong emotions, simplifies ideas and connects them to people’s deepest hopes, fears and dreams. In democratic nations, propaganda helps people make decisions about how to vote. Through propaganda, people can be induced to act together, to overlook our differences and coordinate our actions. Through propaganda, we come to see ourselves as members of the human family, responsible for our collective health and the future of the planet.

Why is propaganda important to media literacy educators? We are now beginning to recognize the risks of the “new shiny object” problem, which sometimes occurs in our community when we focus on the newest technologies and the latest digital platforms. In searching to identify new approaches focusing on our fast-changing digital environments

and identifies, we may discuss disorders, disinformation and fake news without offering appropriate context that helps people understand the present. When addressing fake news, for example, we may risk getting lost in discussions and losing the overall perspective, sometimes merely due to our fear of ghosts from the past.

But the concept of propaganda offers enormous insight on the complex realities we face today, if we are courageous enough to tackle its diverse connotative meanings and to consider how the term is morphing and changing in the global 21st century cultural context. Because definitions of propaganda have changed over time and because people's understanding of the term are inflected by their life experiences and cultural backgrounds, there is a real opportunity for cross-national dialogue about propaganda. Those coming from post-Communist societies, where government propaganda was rampant, think about propaganda in different ways than those who grew up in other parts of the world where consumer culture and advertising were a dominant cultural force. For example, when Renee Hobbs shared the Mind Over Media project with European educators, with support from European Commission's DG CONNECT program, media literacy educators from Western and Eastern Europe started a dialogue about teaching and learning about propaganda. We discovered that the subtle nuances of our cultural backgrounds shapes the way we understand the term itself. At the Mind Over Media website (www.mindovermedia.eu), users can search for examples of propaganda from among 3,000 examples from 40 countries on topics including migration/immigration, climate change, civil rights, crime and law enforcement, food and nutrition, politics and elections, and more. As we discussed how educators may use the platform with their students, the experience challenged our understanding of propaganda because our cultural starting points (influenced by our understanding and experience from the past) shape our thinking. To understand others, we must engage in multiperspectival thinking. This experience led us to wonder about another key question: How do we as global media literacy educators move beyond our own academic bubbles and silos?

This question is a source of inspiration for this special issue. We acknowledge that the media literacy research community and the civil society initiatives that enact media literacy around the world need strong support, especially in countries and regions that are, in some cases, still surrounded by authoritarian regimes and systems. Yet as you will see, the work presented in this volume challenges our understanding of fake news, disinformation, propaganda and digital and media literacy. As you read further, you may wonder: As people develop skills, can they also become better at excluding others? Might increased competence sometimes lead to radicalization? Can we take the best of our communication channels and gain competences but lose inclusiveness and live in the silos surrounded by our tribe members?

In this volume, researchers from different continents and contexts focus on the diverse communities they inhabit, applying a variety of methodological and theoretical concepts. Experiences learned from our colleagues from France, the UK, Croatia, Portugal, Spain, the USA, Mexico, Turkey and India help us to improve our knowledge of existing global praxis and find a new path for future research.



We open this special issue with a paper written by Divina Frau-Meigs, who presents a new approach to information disorders by focusing on risks and opportunities for digital media and information literacy. Frau-Meigs offers up a critique of the “cyberist” worldview and recognizes new risks for democracy in the context of the reorganisation of power through changing technologies advanced by the digital world. As she sees it, the world’s cumulative information disorders may force educators to learn more about how “data impact media and media impact data.” She raises the question of trust and reliability in institutions and media, noting that it connects with the “the overall democratic cost” however still “hard to prove because it is dissipated and distilled.” While analysing existing challenges, she recognizes the paradox of trust in the social media environment. Frau-Meigs does not see a solution in fact-checking but argues that social media platforms may help to create opportunities to develop a “rebooted and retooled” form of media and information literacy.

Another valuable contribution to this special issue of *Media Studies* comes from Julian McDougall. The author adapted and re-purposed for this special issue his article from his forthcoming book, *Fake News vs. Media Studies: Travels on False Binary*. He gathered 25 interviews from multi-stakeholder workshops and managed to capture dialogue between media educators, journalists, students and information professionals. McDougall offers a new path for tackling new information challenges in our society. With detailed recommendations based upon the research, he provides strong arguments for media education to be mandatory in schools “as the first response to the problem of propaganda fake news/disinformation and asking for critical exploration of social media, algorithms and big data to be included in the media education curriculum.”

Discussion on fake-news is further elaborated in detail by Ana Melro and Sara Pereira in their contribution, entitled “Fake or Not Fake? Perceptions of Undergraduates on (Dis)information and Critical Thinking.” Presenting the results of mixed-method empirical research with undergraduate students in Portugal, researchers explore the following question: “How important is the ‘truth’ for journalism and for society?” The main goal of their research is to question students’ understanding of critical thinking and their perceptions of its relevance. Students’ identification of truthfulness and falsehood is associated with their level of education, of course. Melro and Pereira also identify five calls to action from different stakeholders in their society. However, they also go a step further and open a new research question: “how can news and media literacy be fostered in schools and families while addressing changing practices and perceptions of (dis)information?”

Other researchers in this volume take up the task of documenting the need for media literacy competencies of learners, teachers, parents and children, and even journalists. For example, Julieta Flores-Michel and associates examine some of the challenges associated with media consumption among students in Mexico. Flores-Michel strongly emphasizes

the importance of education “as the best way to achieve media literacy” and claims that there is a strong need for further research among students in Mexico. While Mexico is still not yet plugged into huge transnational research projects, in Croatia, a complete overview of media habits of children and parents was made possible as a result of participation in the EU Kids Online project. Danijel Labaš and Lana Ciboci share their comprehensive overview and analysis of parental mediation techniques in Croatia. The article documents the need to hear the voice of parents while building new policies and to recognize them as relevant stakeholders in discussions on media literacy. In point of fact, although the research shows that they are dissatisfied with the inclusion of online safety in the Croatian educational system, their attitudes were not taken into account within the 2019 changes of the curricula.

To understand the role of digital and media literacy in higher education, Yota Dimitriadi contributes with a case study focused on competencies and skills of future teachers, who, according to Dimitriadi, have been rather neglected in previous UK research. The author provides evidence to show that, as future teachers develop digital competencies, they become more confident about their professional expertise and developing identity as educators. Furthermore, Dimitriadi offers up ideas about empowering tutors in education with an effective way of teaching and building new digital learning methods.

Issues of identity surface in Kiran Vinod Bhatia's work on social media and religious identity. In examining Indian adolescents as an example, the author shows how digital literacy is used to enact young people's political and religious identity in ways that contribute to religious polarization, creating echo chambers and belief silos. This research documents a social media ethnography of 49 high school students over a period of eighteen months in villages in Gujarat, India. For these young people, sadly, social media is used to reproduce political polarization and religious discrimination. Bhatia's research sheds new light on the online behavior of children and young people in rural communities showing how online interactions justify and validate prejudice. Young people practice conceptualizing the “religious other” using social media platforms. Through their discourse, they reinforce negative representations of the other in ways that may lead to discrimination and even violence.

While journalists may feel that they are contributing to public media literacy through fact-checking the news, Recep Unal and Alp Şahin Çiçeklioğlu challenge the work of Turkish fact-checkers in their paper in this volume. It is ironic that in an era where many journalism organizations are playing the fact-checking card, there is still so little research about the actual value of fact-checking as it influences the development of public trust and the development of media literacy competencies. They examine the work of Teyit.org, an independent fact-checking organization based in Turkey. This organization aims to prevent false information from spreading online, help media consumers develop their media literacy skills, and develop methods to promote critical thinking. Most of the fact-checking done by Teyit.org focuses on politics as a topic. The organization has been publishing their work in both Turkish and English languages on suspicious content since

2016. This paper is an important step towards developing an overall assessment of the role of fact-checking organizations in Turkey in relation to the development of media literacy competencies among the general public.

Apart from the special issue, in the spirit of cross-national inquiry in media studies and media literacy, we are also introducing a paper by Laura Cervi titled "Similar Politicians, Different Media. Media Treatment of Sex Related Scandals in Italy and the USA." Cervi uses the case study method to identify similarities and differences in reporting about sex scandals by Italian and American media, providing interesting material through a detailed visual, text and journalistic analysis. Such work may inspire scholars and educators to consider how to explore cultural differences in media as a productive way to advance knowledge and understanding among learners of all ages.



In editing this special issue, we pondered the future of digital and media literacy. Certainly the field of media education overall has benefitted from the rising global interest in fake news, disinformation and propaganda. In the last two years we have witnessed a lot of effort by various stakeholders trying to deal with the issue. Politicians, political institutions, media organizations, educational institutions, philanthropies, computer scientists, businesses and civil society organizations have engaged with the problem as they see it. Although the fake-news debate has been an extraordinary opportunity for the field of digital and media literacy educators, we still have not tapped into the full potential of digital and media literacy to empower our citizens to fight for better democracy. Other related issues that continue to trouble us as members of the community of global media literacy scholars and practitioners include the following issues:

Role of Digital Platforms. Digital platform companies are embracing digital and media literacy education initiatives in response to pressures from governments around the world. As they develop initiatives that enable them to claim that they are being more accountable to the public interest, we could be seduced by the scope and scale of this work. Fancy social responsibility projects provided by industry are attractive to policymakers and they may even be viewed as the only (or most effective) way to respond to the challenges of the present time. But such projects generally omit a focus on the role of digital advertising as the engine of the Internet. They are unlikely to help students distinguish between new forms of advertising that are designed to influence people and will not address the actual or potential harms of highly personalized entertainment, information and persuasion. Without a robust critical dimension, such approaches to digital and media literacy are unlikely to activate genuine critical thinking in relation to the socio-economic contexts in which media messages circulate and have power.

Recognizing Self-Interest. Governments and the business community emphasize the potential of digital literacy to revive our economies, but de-contextualized skills training does little to build the habits of mind and citizenship competencies required

of lifelong learners. Some educators worry about jeopardizing academic integrity while building networks and alliances with business stakeholders, recognizing that buzzwords about digital literacy can also devolve into a form of propaganda itself. For example, when businesses emphasize digital literacy, it is often in a quest to get educational institutional institutions to ramp up job-training programs. Similarly, when journalistic institutions position digital and media literacy as a “cure” for restoring public trust, their real motivation may be rooted in the need to rescue their failing business model. But educators who reject digital learning completely in favor of face-to-face pedagogies may also be operating on principles of self-interest when they trivialize or ignore the genuine benefits of digital learning and digital literacy to learners of all ages.

From Transmission Education to Empowerment Education. One of the biggest dangers of teaching about fake news, propaganda and disinformation occurs in the somewhat natural tendency of teachers to stand on a soapbox and lecture about the problem. Such efforts, often framed in relation to left-wing or right-wing ideologies, can provide valuable information, of course. But lecturing is not sufficient to build the kinds of competencies and habits of mind that are needed to deal with a world saturated with entertaining, informational and persuasive propaganda. We believe that it is important to invest in educational models and instructional practices that empower students, teachers, librarians and other actors through collaborative learning with inquiry pedagogies. Digital and media literacy education can help students use the power of propaganda to make a difference in their local and global communities. As we address the rise of fake news and disinformation, we must interrogate understandings of ‘truth’ as a key word and cornerstone for both urban and rural communities. After all, truth may be both timeless and eternal or situational and contextual, bounded in time and subject to flux.

Ultimately, digital and media literacy education is a series of inquiries on epistemology. First, understanding the constructed nature of knowledge in digital environments is essential. Next we must practice the exercise of our power as civic actors to express our truth through public expression and communication. Finally, we will need to cultivate empathy, listening skills, humility and multiperspectival thinking, which are needed to thrive in a multivocal and multicultural world. These are among the most important concepts and competencies for contemporary societies to explore in the years ahead.