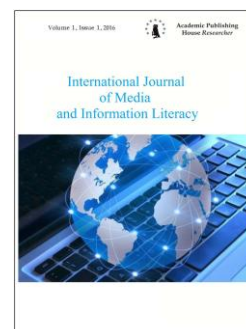


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Published in the Slovak Republic
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Has been issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-106X
2018, 3(2): 66-71

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2018.2.66
www.ejournal46.com



Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

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Abstract

The ability to develop a critical distance from the messages being conveyed through the channels of mass communication is of vital importance. However, the value of Media Literacy education extends beyond media analysis, furnishing critical thinking skills for people who are in danger of losing the ability to come to independent conclusions based on the systematic assessment of evidence. According to Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost, media literacy education enhances critical thinking across a broad range of disciplines: The first large scale empirical study measuring the acquisition of media literacy skills in the United States concluded that incorporating media message analysis into secondary level English language arts curriculum ... improved students' reading, viewing and listening comprehension of print, audio and video texts, message analysis and interpretation, and writing skills. In addition, it should be emphasized that that the discipline of Media Literacy is essentially apolitical. Media Literacy educators teach people how to think, not what to think. What determines the validity of an analysis is the following: 1) the systematic application media literacy methodologies; and 2) the contentions must be supported with concrete examples (e.g., television episodes, films, and social media threads). Instead, the discipline of Media Literacy furnishes individuals with the skills to develop an independence of thought so necessary to the survival of democracy.

Keywords: media literacy, critical thinking, media literacy strategies

1. Introduction

Digital media technology has led to an overwhelming influx of information, which challenges the ability of individuals to develop a critical distance from the content they are exposed to on an ongoing basis. Media Literacy provides strategies for the systematic analysis of content conveyed through the channels of mass communications. But in addition, Media Literacy promotes critical thinking across a broad range of disciplines, providing individuals with the skills so necessary to the survival of democracy.

2. Materials and methods

This article focuses on the topic of media literacy critical thinking. Further, it can be useful to consider other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into critical thinking in the modern times.

3. Discussion

One of the most dispiriting developments of the Trump era has been the assault on critical

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thinking skills throughout American society.

Our current digital media landscape is characterized by an overwhelming influx of information. To illustrate, as of July 2017:

- Ninety percent of the data in the world... has been created in the last two years alone.
- (The) output of data is roughly 2.5 quintillion bytes a day. As the world steadily becomes more connected with an ever-increasing number of electronic devices, that's only set to grow over the coming years.
- On average, the US alone spit out 2,657,700 gigabytes of Internet data every minute ([Hale, 2017](#)).

Digital media technology operates according to the communications model of microcasting, in which information is tailored to an individual's particular interests and expectations. To illustrate, digital billboards can instantly customize its marketing message to the drivers of oncoming vehicles.

The digital media landscape is comprised of individual Information Silos. Each Silo contains information that serves its own particular ideology. The information in each Silos is self-referential, meaning that the sources reinforce the ideas and beliefs of the Silo. The composition of these Information Silos can be explained by the psychological principle of Selective Perception, in which an individual tends to select and interpret content that is in sync with his/her prior dispositions and conceptions. As a result, audience members only patronize their own particular silos, remaining ignorant of the points of view of rival Silos. Thus, a person viewing Fox news is exposed to an entirely different narrative regarding Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election than if he/she watches MSNBC television programming — and vice versa.

This informational segmentation, then, helps to explain the emergence of Fake News — a world of “Alternative Facts,” in which reality is reduced to a matter of opinion. Individuals now inhabit realities of their own choosing, selecting programming that reinforces their own worldviews. Young people choose to immerse themselves in Augmented Reality platforms that offer a far more engaging, attractive, and accepting world than the challenges that they must face in “real life.”

The term “Alternative Facts,” coined by Trump insider Kelly Ann Conway, describes this rejection of fact and logic, in favor of emotional appeals — most notably fear, anger, and envy. In this mass-mediated landscape, the criterion for acceptable communicator is no longer who is most truthful but rather who is the most persuasive storyteller.

As President, Trump has normalized lying as a legitimate form of discourse. Trump describes his untruths as instances of “Truthful Hyperbole”, which he describes as an innocent form of exaggeration, as well as a very effective form of promotion. In addition, Trump makes a further distinction between “innocent exaggeration” and “guilty exaggeration,” in which the Function (or purpose) of a lie can justify its fabrication. Reporter David Barstow provides this example of an “innocent exaggeration”:

“Mr. Trump was asked in a deposition about a script that had been prepared for Trump University instructors. According to the script, the instructors were supposed to tell their students the following: “I remember one time Mr. Trump said to us over dinner, he said, ‘Real estate is the only market that, when there’s a sale going on, people run from the store.’ You don’t want to run from the store.” No such dinners ever took place, Mr. Trump acknowledged. In fact, Mr. Trump struggled to identify a single one of the instructors he claimed to have handpicked, even after he was shown their photographs. Nonetheless, Mr. Trump was not bothered by the script’s false insinuation of real estate secrets shared over chummy dinners. Asked if this example constituted “innocent exaggeration,” Mr. Trump replied, “Yes, I’d say that’s an innocent exaggeration.” ([Barstow, 2017](#)).

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Washington Post identified 24 instances of “false or misleading claims” during the course of a single interview published in the New York Times in December, 2017 ([Stanage, 2017](#)).

It is within this context that Media Literacy has emerged as an essential area of study. Media Literacy is a critical thinking skill that is applied to the source of most of our information — the channels of mass communication. This critical thinking skill enables individuals to identify messages that are being conveyed in the media.

The discipline of Media literacy provides a range of strategies by which citizens can distinguish between false news and legitimate information:

Verification Sites check the veracity of statements made in the media. As an example, the following verification sites were compiled by iste.org:

Fact Check. This nonpartisan, nonprofit project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania monitors the factual accuracy of what is said by U.S. political players, including politicians, TV ads, debates, interviews and news releases.

Media Matters. This nonprofit and self-described liberal-leaning research center monitors and corrects conservative misinformation in the media.

NewsBusters. A project of the conservative Media Research Center, NewsBusters is focused on “documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias.”

Open Secrets. This nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit website run by the Center for Responsive Politics tracks how much and where candidates get their money.

Politifact. This Pulitzer Prize winning website rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials. Run by editors and reporters from the independent newspaper Tampa Bay Times, Politifact features the Truth-O-Meter that rates statements as “True,” “Mostly True,” “Half True,” “False,” and “Pants on Fire.”

ProPublica. This independent, nonprofit newsroom has won several Pulitzer Prizes, including the 2016 Prize for Explanatory Reporting. ProPublica produces investigative journalism in the public interest.

Snopes. This independent, nonpartisan website run by professional researcher and writer David Mikkelson researches urban legends and other rumors. It is often the first to set the facts straight on wild fake news claims.

The Sunlight Foundation. This nonpartisan, nonprofit organization uses public policy data-based journalism to make politics more transparent and accountable.

Washington Post Fact Checker. Although the Washington Post has a left-center bias, its checks are excellent and sourced. The bias shows up because they fact check conservative claims more than liberal ones (Snelling, 2018).

Another category of strategies consists of Quantitative Research Methodologies, in which numerical data furnishes perspective into the following areas of interest: Content, Social, Business/Entertainment, News, Educational, Economic.

Channels of Communication (e.g. Text, Data, Video, Graphics).

Designated Information: Information that is transmitted through specific media (e.g. phone calls or fax transmissions) or to specific audiences.

Undesignated Information: Information directed to a broad audience; Personal Information; Information that does not stand for itself but is woven into an economic context (e.g. information about/from businesses or industries).

Two techniques commonly employed in the quantitative analysis of Big Data are Cross-analysis and Keywords. Cross-analysis refers to an approach designed to identify correlations between data sets by identifying corresponding numerical patterns. Keywords is a methodology in which scholars trace the appearance and frequency of words throughout data sets to provide insight into social movements, developments, and influences.

In addition, software has been developed that assists in the quantitative analysis of Fake News:

- Visual analytics refers to a technique involving the digital display of patterns of information. These Data Visualization Tools shows the intertwined web of Twitter users who spread both the claims and the fact checks, and how they are connected to one another.

- Web Browser Plug-ins can both detect and block fake-news stories. For instance, the Chrome extension "Fake News Alert" informs its clients when they are visiting a site "known for spreading fake news."

- Rumor Identification Applications, such as Hoaxy, visualize the spread of claims and related fact checking online. For instance, Hoaxy can trace the origin of the false claim that millions of votes in the 2016 presidential election were cast by "illegal aliens." By typing in the appropriate search terms, Hoaxy identifies the stories that spread the claims, as well as fact-checking articles that debunked the assertions (Ortutay, 2017).

Finally, numerous Qualitative Approaches can detect false information. Qualitative Analysis consists of a series of methodological “lenses” through which individuals can make sense of the information being conveyed through the media. According to the University of Utah College of Nursing, this type of research focuses on the “why” rather than the “what” of social phenomena to make sense of the information being conveyed through the media.

4. Results

Two notable qualitative strategies are Function and Word Choice.

Function. Identifying the Function, or purpose of a news report focuses on the following question: Does the media communicator want you to think or behave in a particular way as a result of receiving the information?

A body of information (BOI) operates on the basis of Manifest Functions – surface reasons behind the inclusion of certain information. But in addition, a BOI may contain Latent Functions – instances in which the digital media communicator’s intention is beneath the surface and not immediately obvious to the audience. Indeed, at times, the Manifest Functions may be subordinate to its Latent purposes.

To illustrate, Fake news typically fulfills one of the following Manifest Functions: 1) Installing a favorable narrative, 2) Influencing Policies and Events.

But in addition, fake news may fulfill the following Latent (i.e. under the surface) Functions:

- Diverting public attention,
- Undermining Faith in the Media as Societal Watchdog,
- Destabilizing Democratic Systems of Government,
- Accelerating the Loss of Individuals’ Critical Faculties.

Moreover by considering why an agent would compose and distribute a particular Fake News item, one can begin to consider the purpose behind the placement of the Fake News.

To illustrate, Barstow has identified the following patterns with respect to the appearance of Fake News stories: The mystifying false statements about seemingly trivial details (Barstow, 2017):

Why would Trump lie about trivial items? Wouldn’t this simply reinforce the impression of him as a person whose word cannot be trusted?

One reason might be that this strategy is designed to conceal consequential lies amid all of the whoppers, great and small. Moreover, it enables defenders to dismiss this behavior as a mere character trait: That’s just Donald The Fibber again!

The rewriting of history to airbrush unwanted facts (Barstow, 2017):

Why would someone choose to rewrite history? Significantly, this activity was a central feature of the authoritarian society depicted in George Orwell’s iconic novel 1984 and, as such, represents a clue in answer to our question.

In the following passage from the novel, the protagonist, Winston Smith, reflects on his job, which involves altering references to past events:

The messages (Winston) had received referred to articles or news items which for one reason or another it was thought necessary to alter, or, as the official phrase had it, to rectify. For example, it appeared from the Times of the seventeenth of March that Big Brother, in his speech of the previous day, had predicted that the South Indian front would remain quiet but that a Eurasian offensive would shortly be launched in North Africa. As it happened, the Eurasian Higher Command had launched its offensive in South India and left North Africa alone. It was therefore necessary to rewrite a paragraph of Big Brother’s speech in such a way as to make him predict the thing that had actually happened...

As soon as Winston had dealt with each of the messages, he clipped his speakwritten corrections to the appropriate copy of the Times and pushed these into the pneumatic tube. Then, with a movement which was as nearly as possible unconscious, he crumpled up the original message and any notes that he himself had made, and dropped them into the memory hole to be devoured by the flames.

As soon as all the corrections which happened to be necessary in any particular number of the Times had been assembled and collated, that number would be reprinted, the original copy destroyed, and the corrected copy placed on the files in its stead... In this way every prediction made by the Party could be shown by documentary evidence to have been correct, nor was any item of news, or any expression of opinion, which conflicted with the needs of the moment, ever allowed

to remain on record. All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place...

It was merely the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another. Most of the material that you were dealing with had no connection with anything in the real world, nor even the kind of connection that is contained in a direct lie. Statistics were just as much a fantasy in their original version as in their rectified version. A great deal of the time you were expected to make them up out of your head. For example, the Ministry of Plenty's forecast had estimated the output of boots for the quarter at a hundred and forty five million pairs. The actual output was given as sixty-two millions. Winston, however, in rewriting the forecast, marked the figure down to fifty-seven millions, so as to allow for the usual claim that the quota had been overfilled. In any case, sixty-two millions was no nearer the truth than fifty-seven millions, or than a hundred and forty-five millions. Very likely, no boots had been produced at all. Likelier still, nobody knew how many had been produced, much less cared. All one knew was that every quarter astronomical numbers of boots were produced on paper, while perhaps half the population of Oceania went barefoot. And so it was with every class of recorded fact, great or small. Everything faded away into a shadow-world in which, final, even the date of the year had become uncertain (Orwell, 1998).

The Function of this strategy is a response to the old truism, "Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it." Imagine how much easier it is to alter public policy if there is no past to learn from.

The branding as liars those who point out his untruths (Barstow, 2017). This is a displacement strategy in which, even if the statement cannot be disproven, the person who delivers the message can be branded as false (i.e. a liar). Thus, after publicly questioning Trump's trade demands with Canada, Prime Minister Trudeau was immediately branded as a weak backstabber. Significantly, no effort was made to correct Trump's previous praise Trudeau, since such an admission would remind the public that favorable statements had been made.

The deft conversion of demonstrably false claims into a semantic mush of unverifiable "beliefs." (Barstow, 2017).

In our digital landscape, there is no longer is an objective measure to distinguish fact from fiction. Consequently, Truth is now a subjective matter, determined by whose Truth one chooses to believe.

Word Choice

Linguist Kenneth Burke's dictum that "language precedes thought" calls attention to the influence of word choice on the ways that we understand our world. Within this context, analyzing word choice can furnish perspective into the point of view of the media communicator. To illustrate, two of Trump's most frequent phrases, "I guarantee" and "Believe me", convey the message that people should place their faith in Trump — above our social institutions and, even the U.S. Constitution.

The elimination of words can also influence how we make sense of our world. To illustrate, the totalitarian regime of Orwell's 1984 adopted the language of Newspeak — a reductive language that abolished words — and, more importantly, the concepts that these words described.

Orwell explains, the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the (proper) world-view and mental habits... but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought... should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words... This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings... (Orwell, 1998: 327-328).

Significantly, this practice has emerged as the centerpiece of the Trump administration. In December 2017, administration officials at the nation's top public health agency were notified that the following words and phrases were no longer permitted in official budget documents: 1) Diversity, 2) Entitlement, 3) Fetus, 4) Transgender, 5) Vulnerable, 6) Evidence-based, 7) Science-based.

In response, Dr. Sandro Galea, dean of Boston University's School of Public Health, objected to this new policy "because the words that we use ultimately describe what we care about and what we think are priorities...If you are saying you cannot use words like 'transgender' and 'diversity,' it's a clear statement that you cannot pay attention to these issues." (Cit.: Stobbe, 2017).

Moreover, the elimination of these terms has had a direct impact on the implementation of new policies implemented by the administration. Mike Stobbe observes, “Agency workers have been told not to use the term ‘health equity’ in presentations or public talks. The term refers to a goal of removing obstacles like poverty and racial discrimination in making sure people have an equal chance to be healthy. Since President Donald Trump took office, a number of federal agencies have moved to downscale data collection on topics like climate change and homeless people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender and to remove information on such topics from some government websites” (Stobbe, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The ability to develop a critical distance from the messages being conveyed through the channels of mass communication is of vital importance. However, the value of Media Literacy education extends beyond media analysis, furnishing critical thinking skills for people who are in danger of losing the ability to come to independent conclusions based on the systematic assessment of evidence. According to Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost, media literacy education enhances critical thinking across a broad range of disciplines: The first large scale empirical study measuring the acquisition of media literacy skills in the United States concluded that incorporating media message analysis into secondary level English language arts curriculum ... improved students’ reading, viewing and listening comprehension of print, audio and video texts, message analysis and interpretation, and writing skills (Hobbs, Frost, 1999).

In addition, it should be emphasized that that the discipline of Media Literacy is essentially apolitical. Media Literacy educators teach people how to think, not what to think. What determines the validity of an analysis is the following: 1) the systematic application media literacy methodologies; and 2) the contentions must be supported with concrete examples (e.g., television episodes, films, and social media threads). Instead, the discipline of Media Literacy furnishes individuals with the skills to develop an independence of thought so necessary to the survival of democracy.

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