

From information to disinformation. How we teach students to recognise fake news

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Abstract. Due to the rapid expansion of information in the mass media and social media, the phenomenon of fake news represents a major challenge for the educational process. This article aims to highlight the role of teachers in developing students' skills in identifying and critically analysing fake news. Starting from the need to develop critical thinking and implement media education, active-participatory teaching strategies and digital tools that promote learning are presented and analysed. These clearly contribute to stimulating students' ability to assess the credibility of information, recognise manipulation and adopt responsible behaviour in the online environment. The proposed teaching strategies emphasise the importance of integrating media education into current teaching activities as an essential element in the formation of well-informed citizens in a democratic society.

Keywords: Mass media; Social media; Fake news; Disinformation.

1. Introduction

In the current educational context, we have frequently observed difficulties among students in distinguishing between real and false information, a lack of assessment of the credibility of information sources, and a lack of motivation to argue when formulating their opinions. From this perspective, I believe that the development of critical thinking is essential to limit the 'consumption' of fake news, a phenomenon whose effects are often manifested through manipulation and disinformation.

2. Concepts

In order to be informed and to eliminate disinformation, teachers need to find ways to respond to the needs of digital natives who are constantly exposed to information flows, to contribute to their development as responsible and well-informed citizens, and to develop their analytical and argumentative skills, which achieves the objectives of modern education, focused on the need for individuals to adapt to a digitalised society that aims to develop autonomous, critical and responsible personalities.

Identifying fake news is closely linked to the development of critical thinking, which is a transversal skill that is increasingly talked about, against the backdrop of a paradigm shift in education, from one centred on the teacher and the application of traditional methods to one centred on the student and the use of modern teaching-learning-assessment methods.

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In this situation, in order to promote critical thinking, lessons must provide students with a beneficial atmosphere, a suitable setting and sufficient time for them to freely express their ideas, because critical thinking "means supporting certain opinions with convincing, rational arguments and rejecting others, doubting, with the aim of obtaining new arguments that strengthen or, on the contrary, undermine one's own convictions and beliefs, subjecting any personal or others' ideas to analysis and evaluation" (Dumitru, 2001).

In other words, critical thinking is the ability to analyse ideas, behaviours and situations, to evaluate information and to make decisions based on logical arguments; it is cultivated through reflective questions, life scenarios, debates and the analysis of real situations (case studies). Moreover, critical thinking means breaking away from conformity, rationally exploring facts/events and adopting an active attitude towards active and responsible participation in society, analysing social issues and distinguishing real information from false information.

In today's society, the media plays an essential role, contributing significantly to informing the public and shaping public opinion. Through the written press, audiovisual media and social networks, the media influences the way citizens perceive social, political and economic reality by interpreting information. Thus, the media not only reports events, but also has a major impact on the values, attitudes and citizens' behaviour; and the ability to critically analyse media messages becomes an essential condition for avoiding hate spread, manipulation, propaganda, disinformation and awareness of information bias.

In recent decades, digitization has led to the rapid expansion of social networks, which has profoundly changed the way we communicate and consume information. Social networks are characterised by the speed with which they disseminate information, the high degree of virality and the use of personalisation algorithms, which select the content displayed to users according to their interests in the online environment. Although these features make it easier to access information and get people involved, they can also help spread fake news, manipulative stories, or stuff that's just not true.

The mass media is perceived both as a source of information and entertainment, but also as an important educational factor, as it contributes to the formation of attitudes and the hierarchy of values of individuals, integrating itself into the sphere of informal education. In this sense, the contribution of the media is significant, as it is the source of the most extensive and best-received informal messages. Pedagogical theory promotes the concept of informal curriculum, which refers precisely to such learning opportunities, including those offered by the media, an educational factor with an increasingly important role in shaping human personality (Albulescu, 2003).

Conceptually, the media refers to all means of communication and information transmission that allow messages to be disseminated to a wide audience. Depending on the way information is disseminated, traditional forms of mass media can be distinguished, such as the written press (newspapers, magazines), audiovisual media (radio, television), but also new forms of digital communication, represented by social media.

Social media defines a set of digital tools – websites, applications and platforms that operate via the internet and aim to facilitate communication between users, individually or in social groups,

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as well as the creation, distribution and exchange of content (text, images, audio, video or multimedia materials). From this perspective, social media takes a variety of forms, such as blogs and forums, social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Snap-chat, Ticktock), video platforms (YouTube), image sharing sites, mobile applications, instant messaging services (Whats App, Facebook Messenger, Skype, Telegram), online gaming platforms, and collaborative encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia.

The term fake news refers to information that is false, inaccurate or clearly distorted and presented as authentic news with the aim of misleading the public. Fake news takes various forms, such as completely fabricated information, sensationalist headlines, content taken out of context, altered images or videos, opinions presented as facts, and parody news items that are misinterpreted by the public as real information. As a rule, these types of fake news are frequently encountered online and are favoured by the speed of information circulation and social media algorithms that make fake news go viral in a very short time in order to increase the popularity of the social network.

Given young people's constant exposure to the digital environment, the impact of fake news is significant because their critical thinking skills have not been developed, which is why they find it difficult to differentiate between real and false information, taking on unfounded opinions that generate confusion, anxiety or intolerant attitudes towards certain groups.

In conclusion, the concept of fake news is described as a phenomenon that includes false information, deliberately created to mislead, and its negative effects are multiple and profound (UNESCO, 2018):

- Disinformation affects individuals' ability to make correct decisions because erroneous information, the selection of certain information or the elimination of others completely changes a news story.
- Manipulation influences social behaviour by changing attitudes and beliefs in line with the interests of certain centres of power.
- Propaganda uses false information to support ideological or political interests and is a persuasive presentation of ideas that support a theory in order to gain more followers.
- Hate sharing is a common negative effect whereby messages containing hate speech, discrimination or offensive content are rapidly distributed with the intention of amplifying social conflicts, undermining trust in information sources, affecting social cohesion or discrediting certain public figure.

3. Methodology

In order to develop critical thinking, the choice of teaching strategies is not random, but based on careful pedagogical analysis, with the teacher becoming a learning designer who adapts everything to the context, the particularities of the students and the purpose of the lesson (Cucoş, 2014); we take into account the general educational context, the operational objectives of the lesson (what I want to achieve at the end of the lesson - knowledge, skills or attitudes), the content, the particularities of the class (level of development, learning styles, motivation and

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interest), the available resources, the forms of organisation of the activity, but also the assessment methods agreed upon by the students.

The teaching methods chosen by the teacher must add value to the lessons, be interactive, and place students in real learning situations that will give meaning to the entire instructional-educational process and have an impact on the development of students' social and digital skills. The derivation of social skills aims to develop the general skills in the social sciences and humanities curricula and, subsidiarily, to develop media skills and to debate cases taken from the media relating to the problems of belonging groups and the community, as a starting point for civic participation initiatives.

Using methods such as debate, case studies, brainstorming, or double-entry journal (for comparative analysis of sources) will increase students' ability to critically analyse media messages, differentiate between real and false information, correctly assess the credibility of information sources, and develop their skills in argumentation, reflection, and expressing reasoned opinions. At the same time, they will develop a responsible and critical attitude towards the digital environment, manifested through informed, ethical and conscious behaviour in the use of mass media and social networks.

4. Conclusions

The short-term impact will be reflected in improved performance through increased involvement in interdisciplinary learning activities that contribute to changing essential attitudes and adapting to the realities of contemporary society. In the long term, it is expected that students will become responsible, autonomous and well-informed citizens, capable of making the right decisions, exercising discernment in relation to information in the public sphere and becoming actively involved in community life.

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