

# MEDIA LITERACY VERSUS FAKE NEWS: CRITICAL THINKING, RESILIENCE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

Julian McDougall

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER / DOI: 10.20901/ms.10.19.2 / SUBMITTED: 14.05.2019.

**ABSTRACT** *This article shares research findings to support the case for media literacy education to facilitate resilient media engagement by young citizens. It shares the outcomes of a project funded by the US Embassy in London, which brought together leading researchers from the United States and UK with a range of key stakeholders, including journalists, teachers, students, librarians and information professionals. This ethnographic research consisted of interviews with prominent members of the stakeholder fields, four multi-stakeholder dialogic workshops and an extensive field review of literature, policy, pedagogic practice and existing educational resources. From the findings of this ethnography, the argument is presented that critical media literacy, if adopted as a mandatory subject in schools and taught as a dynamic literacy education, would better equip young citizens with resilience to 'information disorder' (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) than reactive resources (such as fact-checking and verification tools) and small-scale projects which focus primarily on competences.*

## KEYWORDS

MEDIA LITERACY, FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION, RESILIENCE

*Author note* \_\_\_\_\_

**Julian McDougall** :: Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, England ::  
jmcDougall@bournemouth.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> The article is adapted and re-purposed for this special issue from *Fake News vs Media Studies: Travels on a False Binary* (McDougall, Palgrave, 2019).

This article shares the findings of an ethnographic research funded by the United States Embassy in London, consisting of a field review, 25 interviews and four multi-stakeholder workshops, bringing together and capturing dialogue between media educators, journalists, students and information professionals.

*As many as possible of the citizens of a democracy must be not only literate but critically literate if they are to behave as full citizens (Hoggart, 2004: 189).*

Hoggart wrote about *The Uses of Literacy* in the north of England in 1957, observing the societal implications of 'mass literacy' and half a century later, reflected on the shifts to a 'mass media society'. The book's original title was *The Abuses of Literacy*. The criterion for a democracy in the statement above endured, as it does today, as we consider *The Uses of Media Literacy* (Bennett *et al.*, 2020) – and its abuses - with renewed urgency as we encounter disinformation, 'fake news' and new forms of propaganda and education is increasingly charged with an obligation to respond.

From the findings of this ethnography, the argument is presented that critical media literacy, if adopted as a mandatory subject in schools and taught as a *dynamic* literacy education, would better equip young citizens with resilience to 'information disorder' (Wardle and Derekhsan, 2017) than reactive resources (such as fact-checking and verification tools) and small-scale projects which focus primarily on competences. The latter are described, metaphorically, as 'giving a fish', the former are described as 'teaching to fish'. To use an alternative analogy, the former boosts the immune system, the latter treat the infection (see Rushkoff, 2018).

## METHODS

25 interviews with media educators and journalists were transcribed and analysed for key discursive patterns. Participative workshops were held at the Media Education Summit in Hong Kong, the English and Media Centre in London, the National Higher Research University in Moscow and Loughborough University's campus at Olympic Park, London. The total sample, including the interviews and participants in the workshops, is 88 (100, minus double counting, as twelve interviewees took part in a workshop).

This article maps the related and intersecting contextual fields informing the issue at stake; offers a thematic summary of the emerging discourses from the interviews, reports the outcomes of the multi-stakeholder workshops and makes recommendations for the media education community of practice.

Because this research adopts ethnographic principles (trying to see my own community of practice, media education, and that of professional journalism from the perspectives of the people I talked to), the book this article is extracted and adapted from includes personal narratives from the teachers and journalists interviewed. Using this approach also means I am making no claims to have captured a robust, scientific evidence, but instead this is an account of what two main participant groups (media

educators and journalists), with two supplementary clusters (students and librarians) and overlaps between their roles, are saying about the subject of the research, at this moment in time. This interest in the personal 'journeys' of the participants was influenced by Renee Hobbs's edited collection *Exploring the Roots of Digital and Media Literacy through Personal Narrative* (2016). For Hobbs's project, key media education practitioners identified intellectual 'grandparents' and reflected on their influence on both their personal history and intellectual development. Primarily, Hobbs's method was formative in developing this project – by placing the focus on the way that a field emerges as a horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1996) and by fusing the public-facing educator and the personal narrative, I wanted to take such a line of enquiry into this research but extend it to the reflections of professional journalists too. For this reason, the interview respondents are named in the book, but they are identified in this article only by their roles as the informed consent given did not include this adaptation. For the same reason, this version only focuses on the professional discourse, and not the more personal, biographical and reflexive aspects.

The participants were recruited through personal networks and events, using purposive, reputational case sampling (these are all prominent, senior and, in many cases, published media educators and senior journalists) and an element of negative case sampling, since I knew that most of the interviewees would resist the binary between media literacy and 'fake news' / disinformation and would therefore seek to complicate matters. Associated activities further connecting me to the sample provided snowball sampling through the existing 'relational network' (Bliss *et al.*, 1983). The interviews were semi-structured, but circulating around the core line of enquiry. After each interview, participants sent me an example, to write about and analyse, as part of the ethnography, as a 'case' or a text – in some cases, this was a teaching resource or lesson plan, in others an article or a visual media text. These will form a 'toolkit' as a key outcome of the US Embassy project. The outcomes of each interview fed into the next as a deliberately partly nomothetic and relational variable. I would share statements from the previous respondent and ask "*what do you think, what's your reaction to that?, do you agree?, do you have similar experiences or ideas to share?*"

My co-researchers for the US Embassy project were Monica Bulger and Paul Mihaildis from the States; David Buckingham, Karen Fowler-Watt and Roman Gerodimos from the UK and Anna Feigenbaum, an American academic working in England.

## EXPLORATION

Monica Bulger's research findings from her work in the US with the Data and Society Research Institute provided a call to arms - that media education needs to *develop a coherent understanding of the media environment, improve cross-disciplinary collaboration, leverage the current media crisis to consolidate stakeholders and develop curricula for addressing action in addition to interpretation.* (Bulger and Davison, 2018: 4).

This 'media environment', though, is very complex.

Whilst both our field review and many of our interviews presented a compelling case for understanding misinformation as nothing new (see Posetti and Matthews, 2018), and certainly propaganda has been an object of study for media education since its inception (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988 and the recent *Mind over Media* project for a sense of the trajectory), a narrative is emerging that situates 'Fake News' as first coming to attention during the 2016 US presidential election, in the form of inaccurate posts with significant viral dissemination on social media, most commonly Facebook. Following a BuzzFeed investigation brought to light an unusual geographical clustering for the originators of these posts, the North Macedonian town of Veles became famous as a kind of 'fake news factory', but the unexpected consequences of this came out of President Trump's enthusiastic adoption of the term to describe negative mainstream news reporting of his actions and policies.

The status of 'fake news' is always configured according to the discourse which speaks it. Take these three examples, all published in 2018, to exemplify:

*Print press organisations and broadcasters are in the process of intensifying their efforts to enforce certain trust enhancing practices. This includes cooperating with civil society organisations and academia to formulate and implement skill and age-specific media and information literacy approaches, continue investing in quality journalism and equip newsrooms with professional automatic content verification tools for audio-visual and text-based reports spread online; ensuring the highest levels of compliance with ethical and professional standards to sustain a pluralistic and trustworthy news media ecosystem (European Commission, 2018: 41).*

*If journalism is, in some sense, a public service, then an editor has to understand the ethos of public service – something which is of value to a society without necessarily making a direct financial return. This means thinking of this kind of journalism in the same way you might think of a police, ambulance or fire service. You would, as a citizen, expect such services to be run efficiently, but you would not expect them to have to justify themselves on grounds of profit. But now, 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: 360).*

*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 first extract is from a high-level policy forum, setting out a strategy for solving a problem, across the member states of the European Union. It locates mainstream, professional media as the safeguarding establishment, working to get their own houses in order to maintain and sustain their own trustworthy services for a public at risk from the alternative. The second account, from a *Guardian* editor, is an insider narrative that places this breakdown of trust in an economic context – the internet creates conditions of possibility for free news, journalism responds with a financial strategy rather than making the case for itself as a public service, the rest is already history. The third takes a hammer to this 'existential crisis' discourse by putting the journalists advocated by the European Commission, Rusbridger and his profession at the heart of the problem itself.

A working definition of fake news or propaganda is to distinguish it by its explicit and deliberate intention to mislead or distort. It is often, but not always, political and it is sometimes used as a kind of attack, for example by one nation on another, to destabilise. But it should also be understood as economic, from 'clickbait' attention generation for advertising and / or the financial trading of data, most famously through Facebook. Related to this, of central importance to how media literacy responds to this, is the question of whether search engines and social media platforms are defined as media providers (of content) or purely technology companies providing services for other parties to share content – in this sense, the regulatory definitions determine not only the political and legal response to 'fake news' but also the academic response.

Definition and verification are only part of this, though. David Buckingham foregrounded the challenges for our project ahead:

*Fake news is a symptom of much broader tendencies in the worlds of politics and media.... There are some significant pedagogical problems in how we might deal with fake news. There's a danger here of assuming that we are dealing with a rational process – or at least one that can, by some pedagogical means, be made rational. But from an educational perspective, we surely have to begin with the question of why people might believe apparently 'fake' news in the first place (2019a: 14).*

'Fake news' is, then, a symptom of something much bigger and the impact of the economic crash of 2008 is a significant context, if not a direct cause, of 'post truth', rather than thinking of it as a media, technological or 'cyber' phenomenon. The polarisation of social media would then be a manifestation of human behaviour in response to the extremes of a crisis in economics (see Tooze, 2018). It is not just that the de-centering impulses of postmodern mediation led, fifty years or so later, to a relativism that would be, inevitably with hindsight, utilised by powerful agents and extremists – a dystopian 'Uses of Literacy'. It is also hard to deny that the conditions of possibility for 'post-truth' are to do with the failure of neoliberal politics to avoid, or respond to the economic crash, at the same time as it has succeeded in dismantling traditional conceptions of 'the public sphere', putting the seemingly natural and neutral workings of the market in its place. One important aspect of all this is that we no longer have a shared view, however contested it might have been, of the role of journalism, the concept of 'public interest', 'holding power to account', 'power and responsibility' and, it is argued, there is declining interest, never mind trust, in the need for coherent public sphere:

*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).*

We can see, then, a problem with trying to apply the 'classic' conceptual competence framework of media literacy to this situation.

## MEDIA LITERACY

A recent review of media literacy education across the European Union reported “an urgent but ongoing need for media literacy educators and stakeholders to document their best practice in the form of empirical classroom research, and to address enduring disconnects between theory and practice, conceptual frameworks and pedagogic practice, and educational/political policy and classroom practices.” (McDougall *et al.*, 2018: 63). Best practice was found to involve moving away from competence models and protectionist approaches to embrace, for a more genuinely critical and holistic media literacy, the complexity of ‘dynamic literacies’ through pedagogy that combine and/or cross boundaries between spaces and roles — the classroom and the extended ‘third space’, teachers and students working in partnership to co-create learning, and professional development in hybrid combinations of physical and virtual networks.

In the US context, Paul Mihailidis (2018) observes a more optimistic ‘state of the art’ for a more activist, civic form of media literacy:

*Between and beyond explorations of national politicians, refugee crises, the dark web, and fake news, there exists a groundswell of innovative and dynamic small-scale and hyper-local initiatives that have leveraged technologies to impact positive social change in the world (Mihailidis, 2018: x).*

Our field review arrived at the conclusion that media literacy should resist the idea that the task is to teach students the difference between fake news and ‘the real thing’. Instead, critical media literacy will facilitate healthy cynicism about and resilience to *all* media. Furthermore, where possible, media literacy education should seek to enable a porous ‘third space’ knowledge exchange (Potter and McDougall, 2017) between academic perspectives on critical thinking about media and students’ ‘lifeworld’ engagements with collective civic media literacies. This pedagogic approach for a more dynamic and agentic media literacy is more likely to foster resilience, to ‘teach to fish’:

*What about looking at the vitality of the patient instead? So rather than coming up with a new algorithm to filter dangerous, weaponized memes from my teen’s Instagram account what about if I just make my teen, and our culture, more resilient to this? So I’m trying to promote our humanity so we’re less vulnerable to the insanity rather than looking at the insanity as the problem to be fixed (Rushkoff, 2018).*

## DIALOGUE

The key themes from the field review fed into the interviews and the workshops, which were designed to share perspectives and generate knowledge on four issues, are:

(1) clarifying the problem (the apparent ‘information disorder’, see Wardle and Derekshhan, 2017) from lived experience of the stakeholders, as opposed to what they had read about it or been exposed to through networks or ‘echo chambers’. This was a form of audience / reception study, as we were interested in whether collective framing by stakeholder category;

(2) identifying any competing or partly integrated discourses around the concept of trust in media and information, and from this, exploring participants' relationships with 'real' journalism now and in the future – put bluntly, why do we need it?

(3) evaluating a range of media literacy resources already in the world – we called this 'testing the wheel', investigating stakeholder perceptions. For example, were some resources appealing to teachers but not to students, how would journalists feel about a resource which situates all media as 'propaganda'?

(4) agreeing on what media education can realistically do, and accepting what is just too big, too external to the social practices of teaching and learning, for us to address. The intention here was to move beyond 'solutionism' (Buckingham, 2019a and 2019c) towards a more viable, modest proposal. Where *do / can* we have agency?

From the interview transcripts, four key discourses emerged which were also articulated frequently in the workshops. For the purposes, and constraints, of this article, three interview quotes are used to represent each discourse, using critical discourse analysis to code and categorise the transcribed statements.

### (1) Identity Work

From journalists, mainly, this discourse articulates optimistic legitimization of their practice. In the interviews, this discourse repeatedly insulated truth and trust from both fake news and disinformation online and 'the enemy within' of irresponsible or corrupt news reporting. A sub-genre of this discourse was the distinction between the external threat of fake news and the internal challenge of the kinds of professional malpractice that had led to calls for new forms of regulation, in the UK context. For media educators, there was a tension between seeing themselves as agents of positive change, as the 'go to' for a response to the problem, and the importance of keeping faith in the political project of media education which fosters an analytical understanding that (my words) 'all news is fake news'.

(1a) *In the media market place as a journalist, you are assaulted by fake news, manipulation and the seductive offer of power. All too often now I encounter people in journalism who think all that matters is that you have an opinion. No. What matters is that you vigorously investigate your own opinions, that you take what you believe and you subject it to forensic examination, when you critically see things from the point of view of the other person, with empathy.* (Journalist)

(1b) *For me, fake news is the obvious endpoint of decades of a heavily commodified product (news). To focus on a kind of techno-fix to fake news as though just teaching the kids that if they can identify fake news, all will be fine, is a useful distraction; but it may well result in letting legacy media, which has got us to this problem in the first place, off the hook, as they claim that they, and only they, can show us what the truth is.* (Media educator)

(1c) *I agree that mainstream media is a problem but I think at the moment it's about looking for ways of re-imagining journalism, for me it's a very different space that we're now in, but as a result of something that has been around since the beginning of time.* (Media educator / ex-journalist)

This third quote converges with the second key discourse – that there is a new aspect of an old problem for us all to worry about.

## (2) All News is Fake News?

In this regard, journalists from different organisations were more likely to differ in their specific sense of the boundaries between the past and the now, or between generations and also in the relationship between journalism and media education – some journalists, like the first respondent here, were very open to collaboration, but they were in most cases people who had worked in both roles, whilst others were more defensive and resistant to the failure of media teachers to adequately distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ news:

(2a) *There's a tendency towards tribalism within journalism that really favours practical journalistic experience over other sorts of knowledge and I think it becomes often a position of defensiveness on the part of journalists (and me included, historically). I can think of the fine line between misinformation identifiable in tabloid newspapers that are particularly partisan, taking a particular position on an issue like mass migration or refugees and there's a political line that's being followed, whereas some journalists might draw a line there and say 'well I'm not going to criticise other news organisations, no matter what they do and I'm not going to accuse them of misinformation because to do so would be to break away from the profession'.* (Media educator / ex-journalist)

(2b) *With social media, instantly you are part of the conspiracy, the media, the police and the state are deliberately under-stating the tragedy. So here are multiple versions of events, multiple opposing "truths" and ours becomes one of them. "Where is the media?" Where has the media been?" So we are working to the rules – find sources and establish facts, but on social media those rules don't apply and we are accused of taking the side of the state, part of a conspiracy. I would say that, in my career, something is changing that means it is just so much more difficult to operate ethically as a professional journalist.* (Journalist)

(2c) *It's a demographic shift, old people don't have any media literacy but unfortunately because of the way the world works, old people have a lot of power. And on the other hand, you have extremely cynical opportunistic millennials in Gen-Z who know they can culture-jam. This sort of information fight happens with any sort of new technology. The main difference with the internet vs the printing press, say, is that it's invisible, all-encompassing and immediate. So for a young journalist, you have to understand you're going into a world which is pretty much constantly having its own referendum about something all of the time.* (Journalist)

This quote, again, connects with the third discourse, shared by some journalists and information professionals and by all teachers and students, about the difference between media literacy for its own sake and an educational project which looks to its uses in future society.

## (3) Not 'Just' Media Literacy

This was to do with the need for something, variously described as critical, political or moral, to come before, or underpin media literacy – relating to our interest in the ‘uses of’ media literacy, as opposed to functional skills or vocational training:

(3a) *I would say that youngsters have higher levels of information skills, of digital skills, but they are not media literate always, the problem is students come with the approach 'we know everything about fake*



*news, disinformation, viral campaigns, propaganda'. But when I start to show the examples that I know they were not exposed to, at the end they really become aware of low level of critical thinking in their consuming of media content, especially for social networks. So, the first level is the scale, then we come to the competencies, then we have the critical awareness and then you can include morality in that concept. (Media educator / ex-journalist)*

*(3b) I always think that media education encourages that propensity for enquiry. But also as a philosophical and epistemological enquiry, what is this thing that I am looking at, what does it tell me about the world? It's really important to talk about power and capitalism but the way that media education works is to start with the thing that kids are close to, to ask – OK, that thing that you're doing every day, that video, that game, social media or whatever you're doing, what is that really about. (Media educator).*

*(3c) Fake news has kind of reset everybody's GPS, if you want, all the professions – the librarians; the journalists; the researchers; the data scientists; the teachers – it's reset things that we thought were established and engraved in marble, yes? We have to revise our values for the digital world. (Media educator)*

#### **(4) A Matter of Trust**

Trust is a key discursive marker in the societal challenge around media literacy, it is heavily loaded and fraught with assumptions (see LSE, 2018 and Buckingham, 2019b). In this more complex, but really the most important discourse for our generation of new knowledge on this topic, media educators, mainly, presented arguments for combining new resources for deconstructing media to locate its biases and / or its distorting properties, but also a cautious approach to both putting 'trust' at the centre of this debate and to seizing an opportunity to regain credibility for our work – back to legitimizing professional identities and thus connecting back to discourse (1) – by situating media literacy in a solutionist discourse with its attendant neoliberal impulse to position citizens as responsible entirely for their own 'uses of media literacy':

*(4a) There are search tools provide students with an opportunity to find the original source of information or the original posting of information on the internet with the web-based article so it provides you with the kind of matrix of how an article draws upon previous articles, perhaps deliberately only selecting particular features from the original post which then of course leads to exposure of bias, some provide a trust rating for students, so I think these kinds of algorithmic approaches to news we wouldn't have had access to ten years ago in media education and now we do, so these tools really need to start to come into the classroom environment alongside the traditional media theory concepts that we've taught very effectively over a number of years. (Media educator)*

*(4b) In a fantastically complicated media environment where the commercial interests are just so huge and the potential for manipulation is so enormous, the burden on ordinary people to be media literate is overwhelming and actually too much for anyone to be expected to manage, which is why I come back to the necessary balance between media literacy and media regulation – which is where we say, as a society, there is a limit to what people can know and learn and manage for themselves and at that point we need to take a structural intervention in the public interest. (Media educator)*

*(4c) The Media Studies literature from the 1980s and 1990s applies to this, Greg Filo's 'Bad News', picking apart reporting of the Miners' Strike, so it's surprising when you think about it that instead of going there we get this simpler narrative of solving a digital problem with digital tools. There's not much in the public discourse about us wanting things to be true so much that we help things go viral without checking, more*

*out of hope than belief. Media education is a good space for that more complex discussion, but I have little faith in the idea that verification tools can save us.* (Media educator)

Ahead of our final workshop in London, David Buckingham, Monica Bulger and Paul Mihaildis gave presentations at a public event and Karen Fowler-Watt and Roman Gerodimos joined them in a panel discussion with the audience (see CEMP, 2019).

In the plenary discussion with the mixed stakeholder groups and our subsequent data analysis stages, our line of enquiry shifted from inter-related, competing or tangential discourses, and whether these were framed by role, towards extrapolation of the common ground – from this dialogic research, what could we take forward as multi-stakeholder experiences of ‘fake news’; shared desires for trust and truth; the efficacy of media literacy for resilience? Informed by Rushkoff’s ‘Team Human’ call (2018, see also Mason, 2019) for us to focus more on the vitality of the patient, these are presented here as diagnosis, treatment and prevention.

## DIAGNOSIS

*Fake news is a continuum. Multiple people interpret it in different ways.*

*Studying poetry at 19, I discovered there is no such thing as truth ... it's a slippery beast.*

There was agreement that the problem is not only about information disorder but also the failure of education to create resilient, critical thinkers – “*we need a conversation about the purpose of education. Why is it necessary to be educated? Different modes of education mean different paradigms and worldviews for students*” and “*What is a school education that is fit for the future? Media literacy is peripheral instead of central, that needs to change.*” There was also a shared view that the lack of a civil, debating culture in state education is part of the problem.

On questions of trust, participants agreed that the ‘blind trust’ in social media was a problem, that genuinely trustworthy media would have “no hidden agenda” but that, in the ‘post-truth’ era, there might be a generational distinction between a broad scepticism (“there’s always an agenda”) and a more trusting engagement – “*You can piece together your own trust, from different perspectives on twitter*”. The dialogue ‘zoomed in’ in two themes – objectivity is an illusion (“*Get the extreme views from both sides and the truth is somewhere in the middle*”), but “*if you don’t trust anybody or anything, then your kind of lost.*” – and an agreement that there is a new danger here, in the shape of ‘the dark art of the algorithm’ and, thus, media literacy is about something new, something else, these days – “*The browser that you choose is not a neutral choice.*”

On trust, journalists articulated a different discourse in every group at every workshop, both asserting an insider position and defending the profession:

*My relationship is with my sources, refugees in camps in Libya – anything inaccurate can have real world affects. If I get something wrong, then my sources are going to be in a very bad situation. And if one thing that is wrong, somebody can use that to discredit the entire report.*

*With breaking news, it's hard to verify things, especially from social media. There is an expectation that the BBC should be first – so the pressure comes from social media.*

*The difference between articles taking months to verify information compared to those that have taken minutes – there's a difference and we need to be able to distinguish between the two. And that gets confused on social media.*

There was also a much clearer sense of definition of terms from journalists than the other groups. Journalists could 'tell the difference' and saw fake news as 'more of a thing'. The closest other group were library professionals, described more in terms of information literacy as checking sources. Students and teachers were generally either more sceptical about the term 'fake news' or less inclined to see a distinction between fake and real.

## TREATMENT

Clearly, participants volunteering to attend workshops on media education and disinformation are likely to agree that education is part of the solution. But whilst several of the online resources and fact-checking tools already in the public domain were evaluated positively, there was widespread agreement in the greater need for critical thinking 'before the event' – *"like driving a car, you may not need to know everything that's under the bonnet but it would help if you broke down, and you definitely need to know how to steer"*. Extending the metaphor, *"the internet warrior behind a screen is a bit like road rage, so how do we equip people to de-escalate?"*

Two less predictable findings emerged – across the stakeholder groups, participants tended to agree that (1) the fine balance between media education / literacy for critical resilience and the tipping point into distrust of all information was the place where we should be applying our energies and that (2) if the critical thinking fostered in Media Studies (in the UK context) were integrated into all the curriculum, then we would not need Media Studies, but currently, young people are at more risk without it as it is the only place in education where questions of trust in information are located. This is a deeply ironic situation in the UK, where it is derided by politicians and academics in the higher ranked Universities for its lack of 'substance'.

*Critical not cynical. Blind faith and unthinking trust is also a problem.*

*You don't have to assess the problem negatively. Can be a conversational thing and can be a positive thing, while still building a critical mindset and creating skills.*

*It's moral ownership of what we put out and its broader citizenship, not just a question of media literacy. But studying media is a good place to start, and then broaden out to those issues.*

And on resisting the pitfalls of moral surveillance in the classroom:

*Some of this has to be trial and error. As with sex and drugs, there is a danger that teachers being overbearing and just talking down to students might not help. The same is true with media literacy.*

The economic modality of education was also enacted. Whilst not a common perspective, this is an important angle, since it moves us beyond a purely oppositional position in terms of the current, 'neoliberal' framing of education:

*Economic status for young people is predicated on them being knowledgeable. Knowing what's true and what's not is part of that and provides credibility, as information is currency.*

There was less consensus on the value of trust, 'per se'. This seemed a loaded premise, with each group attaching their own emphasis to, perhaps, validate their own agency – trust in journalism; students lacking trust as a rationale for disengagement with the public sphere, teachers as agents in discerning trust; library professionals as custodians of trustworthy information.

## PREVENTION

In the recorded conversations, the participants agreed on a way forward for both journalism and education, in an ideal world, making suggestions that resonated with many of the interviews from preceding chapters:

*Upfront transparency – we are funded by so and so. Political bias is so and so, open and upfront. Fact and opinion, clearly labelled and signposted.*

*Journalism that is close to the community and as close as possible to the source.*

*We need the transparency and the critical education in tandem. It's a matter of balance and dual responsibility.*

On the other hand, journalists – as in the interviews – were much keener to prescribe for students an 'appreciation' of their work, and this problematic fault-line has run through this project:

*Make students understand good journalism is expensive, and valuing it leads to more of it being done. Don't just criticise. Knowledge surrounding journalism architecture and values is missing.*

On extracting the viable agency for resilience, there was consensus that more inter-agency work is crucial in the short term, that this might be a longer term project, but that we should be optimistic:

*Everybody's looking for a quick answer, but what we're talking about here is going to take twenty to forty years. We need a new literacy for the twenty-first century and it's not going to happen tomorrow*

*and nobody around education wants to hear that. And the corporations are not going to change, their business model is to keep people on their platforms.*

*There are alliances we should be wary of. Recently we were approached by Russia Today for a partnership, involving our students. Is that an alliance we want? If Google funds a project, what's lying behind that?*

*The most important alliances in the short term are across the curriculum, media educators working with teachers in Science, Maths, raising media awareness in all subjects, for example there's plenty of fake news about science.*

*There's that old line – in a democracy, you get the politicians you deserve. Well, in the twenty-first century, we get the information we deserve. If we build resilience in our students, make them critical consumers of media and information, not just cynicism but inculcating critical thinking, then the environment will change. Ultimately, if we teach our students to demand better media, it will happen.*

### GIVING A FISH, TEACHING TO FISH

A crucial finding from the workshops, during which we evaluated media literacy resources already in the world, was that we need to differentiate between quick, short term, 'reactive' approaches and longer term critical education. The former were described as 'giving a fish' and some examples which met with multi-stakeholder approval are *Be Media Smart, The Trust Project, Mind over Media, NewsGuard, DeepNews.AI, Common Sense. Org* and *Wikiritribune*:

*For any person, group, company, organization – we can create an index of every fact check that has been done about things they have said – whether those fact checks were done at WikiTribune or elsewhere. And we can collect statements that need to be fact checked. It's a bit rough right now – it's a wiki after all! But I also want to emphasize that it's a playground – if you have a useful idea, please just dig in and get started. It's the wiki way!*

In countries with media literacy education initiatives, but no formal, assessed subject in schools (so, everywhere except the UK, currently), we can find a huge range of evidence of 'what works', with varying degrees of scale and, often, in comparison to Media Studies, the successful implementation and outcomes of these pedagogic interventions are something of a progression towards the more holistic, critical media education being by our field review. To take one example, Hodgkin and Kahne's account (2018) of civic media literacy education in response to fake news, in the US, focus on 'what teachers can do' and located three elements – developing nuanced skills and strategies for assessing truth claims, reflective thinking about students' own biases and assumptions and then 'Practice, Practice, Practice' to foster an experiential learning process to cultivate new habits of mind. This is typical of an abundance of such responsive activity across the world (see de Abreu *et al.*, 2017; McDougall *et al.*, 2018; McDougall *et al.*, 2019). It is an example of media literacy practice *in between* the provision of open access resources by the mainstream media, independent third parties, NGOs or the likes of Google and Facebook themselves and a fully formed critical media education. In this sense, these interventions are more than *giving a fish* but less than *teaching to fish*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This project addressed, directly, the hypothesis that *Media literacy has become a center of gravity for countering “fake news”*. (Bulger and Davison, 2018: 3) and our findings have enabled us to answer the report’s concluding open questions (2018: 21), as follows:

1. Can media literacy even be successful in preparing citizens to deal with fake news and information? *Yes. Media Studies prepares citizens to take a critical, but not a cynical, approach to engagement with all media, including professional journalism, ‘mainstream media’ more broadly, and social media.*
2. Which groups should be targeted for media literacy interventions? *If our current problems are the work of ‘baby boomers’, then the civic engagement of young people in schools now is our priority so that, in the future, ‘the media’ is produced more ethically and consumed more critically. To achieve this, it is paramount that every young person takes Media Studies in school.*
3. How can media literacy programs effectively address overconfidence in skills? This can manifest preemptively (individuals who feel they need no media literacy training) and reactively (individuals who overestimate the effectiveness of their media literacy training). *Media Studies has a track record in working in the ‘third space’, fostering a porous exchange of critical, theoretical thinking (from teachers) and media engagement (from students).*
4. Are traditional media literacy practices (e.g., verification and fact-checking) impractical in everyday media consumption? How can media literacy initiatives respond to the powerful systems of media ill-literacy (e.g., clickbait, feed algorithms) which already condition individuals’ media behaviors? *Yes, instead of offering verification tools, we should think of critical media literacy as the best ‘toolkit’.*
5. How are groups committed to disinformation and propaganda able to harness the language of literacy and critical analysis to sow new distrust of media and establish adversarial political spaces? *We need a focus on the ‘Uses of Media Literacy’ rather than a set of apparently neutral competences for citizens. Media Studies / media literacy must prioritise this critical, societal and political dimension.*
6. How will the overlapping efforts of media literacy stakeholders interact? Will new signals for trustworthiness aimed at limiting “fake news” backfire, producing new uncertainty around media messages? *This field ethnography, the set of interviews and the findings from the workshops culminate in a strong, multi-stakeholder consensus that Media Studies should be mandatory in schools. If every young person learns the key concepts of Media Studies – genre, narrative, representation, audience, ideology, and applies ‘classic’ deconstructive approaches to contemporary media texts, news content and technological developments in mediation, we will avoid both the false binary of ‘real vs fake’ and the danger of hyper-cynical distrust of all media. Media Studies puts media literacy to work in an academic context, connecting the study of media to questions of history, politics and ethics.*

This research has found agreement in the intersection between media education and journalism that media education should be mandatory in schools as a first response to the problem of propaganda fake news / disinformation. But the potential of the discipline and the prescribed curriculum are not the same thing. Before it can be effective, media education needs a ‘reboot’ to foster a critical resilience through advanced academic deconstruction of media, combined with theorised production of the same media. The research suggests that this is a more effective and sustainable approach than ‘giving a fish’

through fact-checking tools or surface level media / information literacy competences. As Buckingham puts it:

*Ultimately, education should do more than simply enable us to understand and to cope with what already exists. It should also encourage us to explore alternatives, and to demand change.* (2019: 118).

The data generated from the field review, interviews and workshops lead us to the following three recommendations:

- (1) Rather than producing competence frameworks for media literacy, as though it is a neutral set of skills for citizens, media education needs to enable students to apply the *critical* legacies of both Media and Cultural Studies and literacy education on the contemporary media ecosystem;
- (2) Media education must adopt a *dynamic* approach to media literacy and increase the experiential, reflexive aspects of media *practice* in the curriculum, with reciprocal transfer between the critical rhetoric above and creative media practice in order to respond academically to media as, primarily, a question of representation. In other words, resilience *to* representation is enhanced by expertise *in* representing.
- (3) We need to add the critical exploration of social media, algorithms and big data to the media education curriculum, accompanied by applied practical learning in the *uses* of them for social justice, as opposed to training the next generation in the use of these for even further commercial and political exploitation of one another.

We conclude that media literacy education is already in a good place to be easily adapted and developed for objectives (1) and (2) but as a community of practice we will need a watching brief on (3) in the longer term.

## References

- >Bennett, Pete; McDougall, Julian and Potter, John (2020, forthcoming) *The Uses of Media Literacy*. London: Routledge.
- >Bernstein, Basil (1996) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- >Bliss, Joan; Monk, Martin and Ogborn, Jon (1983) *Qualitative Data Analysis for Educational Research*. London: Croom Helm.
- >Bridle, James (2018) *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. London: Verso.
- >Buckingham, David (2019a) Teaching Media in a 'Post-Truth' Age: Fake News, Media Bias and the Challenge for Media / Digital Literacy Education. *Cultura y Educación* 31 (2): 213-231. DOI: 10.1080/11356405.2019.1603814.
- >Buckingham, David (2019b) *How much trust in media do we need?* <https://davidbuckingham.net/2019/03/12/how-much-trust-in-media-do-we-need/> (29/07/2019).
- >Buckingham, David (2019c) *The Media Education Manifesto*. London: Polity.
- >Bulger, Monica and Davison, Patrick (2018) The Promises, Challenges and Futures of Media Literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10 (1): 1-21. DOI: 10.23860/jmle-2018-10-1-1.
- >Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) *Media Literacy versus Fake News: Critical Thinking, Resilience and Civic Engagement*. <https://www.cemp.ac.uk/projects/US-Embassy.php> (07/05/2019).

- >De Abreu, Belinha S.; Mihailidis, Paul; Lee, Alice Y. L.; Melki, Jad and McDougall Julian (eds) (2017) *The Routledge International Handbook of Media Literacy Education*. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315628110.
- >Edwards, David and Cromwell, David (2018) *Propaganda Blitz: How the Corporate Media Distort Reality*. London: Pluto Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv69tg4v.
- >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.
- >Herman, Edward S. and Chomsky, Noam (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- >Hobbs, Renee (ed.) (2016) *Exploring the Roots of Digital and Media Literacy through Personal Narrative*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- >Hodgkin, Erica and Khane, Joe (2018) Misinformation in the Information Age: What Teachers Can Do to Support Students. *Social Education* 82 (4): 208–212.
- >Hoggart, Richard (2004) *Mass Media in a Mass Society: Myth and Reality*. London: Continuum.
- >Hoggart, Richard (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Pelican.
- >London School of Economics (2018) *Trust, Truth and Technology*. London; LSE Publications.
- >Mason, Paul (2019) *Clear Bright Future*. London: Penguin.
- >McDougall, Julian (2019) *Fake News vs Media Studies: Travels in a False Binary*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- >McDougall, Julian; José Brites, Maria; Couto, Maria-José and Lucas, Catarina (2019) Digital Literacy, Fake News and Education. *Cultura y Educación* 31 (2): 203-212. DOI: 10.1080/11356405.2019.1603632.
- >McDougall, Julian; Zezulková, Marketa; van Driel, Barry and Sternadel, Dalibor (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.
- >Mihailidis, Paul (2018) *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance*. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315526058-5.
- >Mind over Media (2015) <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/about> (07/05/19).
- >Posetti, Julie and Matthews, Alice (2018) *A Short Guide to the History of Fake News and Disinformation*. Washington, DC: International Center for Journalists.
- >Potter, J and McDougall, J (2017) *Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising Third Space Literacies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- >Rusbridger, Alan (2018) *Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why it Matters Now*. London: Canongate.
- >Rushkoff, Douglas (2018) *Team Human*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- >Tooze, Adam (2018) *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*. London: Random House.
- >Wardle, Claire and Derakhshan, Hossein (2017) *Information Disorder Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.



# MEDIJSKA PISMENOST PROTIV LAŽNIH VIJESTI: KRITIČKO RAZMIŠLJANJE, OTPORNOST I PARTICIPACIJA GRAĐANA

Julian McDougall

**SAŽETAK** *Ovaj rad podupire tezu da je medijsko opismenjavanje ključ za povećanje otpornosti mladih građana pri korištenju medija. Rad prikazuje ishode projekta financiranog od strane veleposlanstva SAD-a u Londonu, koji je okupio vodeće istraživače iz SAD-a i UK-a, uključujući i veliki broj ključnih dionika, primjerice novinare, nastavnike, učenike, knjižničare i informacijske stručnjake. Etnografsko istraživanje uključivalo je intervjue s dionicima iz različitih područja, četiri radionice koje su pozvale na dijalog više dionika iz različitih područja te opsežan pregled literature, politike, pedagoške prakse i postojećih obrazovnih resursa. Nalazi ove etnografije potvrđuju da kritička medijska pismenost, ako je prihvaćena kao obavezan predmet u školama i podučava se kao dinamična pismenost, može bolje pripremiti mlade građane da budu otporni na „informacijske poremećaje“ (Wardle i Derakhshan, 2017) nego djelovanja koja nastaju kao reakcija na medijski poticaj (kao što su provjera činjenica i verifikacijski alati) te mali projekti koji se primarno fokusiraju na kompetencije.*

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI

MEDIJSKA PISMENOST, LAŽNE VIJESTI, DEZINFORMACIJE, OTPORNOST

*Bilješka o autoru* \_\_\_\_\_

**Julian McDougall** :: Sveučilište Bournemouth, Bournemouth, Engleska ::  
jmcDougall@bournemouth.ac.uk