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Digital Media Shaping Democracy: The need for Media Literacy

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the new role of the media in the digital era: whether the end of the information monopoly of traditional news agencies led to diversity of opinions, more freedom and democracy or it created informative chaos and fake news. The process of replacement of daily newspapers with social media as main source of news has resulted with victory of speed over truth, less investigative journalism, news reached through links provided by social networks based on algorithms that decide what news can get through them etc. The multiple sources of informing created increased political awareness and objectivism, but also they contributed towards losing focus on what is important and a lot of fake news. The paper focuses on the free speech and fake news battle. It gives a special focus on the urgent need for media literacy in the era where the internet-caused information apocalypse increases the importance of detecting fake from real. New model of 'citizen-journalists' can often mislead the public opinion and can become a threat for truth as much as the fake news. In times when the traditional business model for delivering news is in crisis and the media content is focused on dramatization, simplification, sensationalism, personalization, the media literacy has to become an inevitable part of every democratic society and its educational system.

Keywords: digital media, internet, fake news, citizen-journalist, media literacy.

1. Introduction

We live in a world where cyberspace is becoming natural and inevitable part of our lives and a universal connection to the world. The nervous system of our societies is build upon Internet and computer networks. The mass media began to politically conquer the world after the mass literacy and popular press appeared in 19th century. The media became influential actor of the society, shaping political processes, attitudes, prioritizing public policies by creating perceptions for different issues. This process developed fast after the appearance of television in 1950s, which made mass media to become reliable, easily approachable and important source of information. Media became powerful actors on the economic scene by accumulating great market power and influence. The governments were not ready to ignore the mass media: they found partners and supporters for their policies among them.

But, the things have changed in the past few decades due to the digitalization as an inevitable process of the technological development. These new technologies digitalized the content of information and the news became transmittable over the Internet or computer networks. Technically, the Internet is one small episode in the ever-evolving parade of technology, soon to be outmoded. Culturally and economically, however, the Internet seems to be a phenomenon nearly unprecedented in human history. (Moore, 1999). The traditional channels of informing like television or newspapers began to lose their monopoly over news. But does this process of enabling diversity of opinions led to more freedom and democracy or it created informative chaos and fake news?

Digital media, and the Internet in particular, are transforming our means of gathering information and communicating with each other and contributing to both these practices through creative production. In informational terms, use of the Internet clearly has the potential to influence the capacity of 'ordinary' citizens and resource-poor social or political groups to gain information and expertise through vastly increasing the range of information that is freely available to any Internet user, on virtually any subject imaginable (Bimber 2002).

The digitalization of media was accompanied by the phenomenal growth in social networking sites and their mass usage, such as Facebook and Twitter. Their popularity was enormously growing in the past years together with the time spent on them. They offer high level of interactivity and stimulate active production of content by the users, which brought new standards for communication based on interactivity and speed of production and reception of information. The social networking sites are also claimed to break down the barriers between traditionally public and private spheres of communication, putting power into the hands of the user and thereby giving the details of private concerns a public presence and enabling the public domain of the official political and institutional realm to be more easily monitored by the private citizen (Papacharissi 2009). If traditional news media have been claimed to function as a fourth estate holding the institutions of the state to account, Dutton (2007) argues that new media bring forth a new 'pro-social' dimension that exceeds the limitations of traditional media, leading to a 'Fifth Estate' that reaches beyond and moves across the boundaries of existing institutions, becoming an alternative source of news as well as a citizen-check on public life and private enterprise. In this manner they proffer a new form of social telling (Fenton, 2012).

Citizens prefer using social networking sites because they offer more control to information than mass media, have creative potential, interactivity, permanent availability, expand extremely quickly and they are mobile. In this context, the media theory based on producer and consumer has been destabilized and citizens become producers and consumers without mediation of traditional mass media. But social media are driven by communication, rather that information and even when information is offered, it is not always relevant and by subjects with real identity. The new media are open, but it is not necessarily that they are liberal neither they lead directly to democratizing of the society. They may generate progressive forces and mobilize social transformation with Internet. But we have to be aware that Internet community is built upon political infrastructure of a certain society and it inherits its features and foundations.

2. The information is power

Many have predicted that the explosion of information would fuel a democratic revolution of knowledge and active citizenship. If information is power, power can now be within the grasp of everyone (HMSO, 2000). Free Internet has provided a platform for multiple sources of informing and many sides of the truth. However, the general public has not given up on the traditional way of informing, using the mainstream media. Furthermore, the Internet was allegedly supposed to lead to the production of more news, more diverse news, and increased public participation in news processes. A major outcome however, was homogeneity shaped as one-dimensional picture

of online news. If the mainstream perspective faces different views that oppose or confront, then the new media publishes them but remain uncovered by the mainstream media.

According to a recent research in Germany, the young generation is generally informed by the network, using links of newspapers in Facebook or WhatsApp, or algorithms of YouTube decide what news can get through them. What used to be the news story today is a mix of news portal articles and blog posts, comments and tweets, excerpts from news broadcasts, and private mobile movies. An individual Infosoup on the smartphone (Spiewak, 2018).

Information today is based on knowledge, many facts, but not much wisdom. The euphoric predictions that pluralism in informing will bring democratization to our societies turned out to be widely exaggerated. Many news on global level do not necessarily increase democracy, but instead they cause decrease of their value, victory of speed over truth, less investigative journalism etc. The multiple sources of informing created increased political awareness and objectivism, but also they contributed towards losing focus on what is important, a lot of fake news, instrumentalization of social media by state-directed counterfeiters. According to the former constitutional judge Udo Di Fabio, "With centrality, the public loses its inner order and reliability. Journalistic research is replaced by the snapped instantaneous knowledge of states of excitement, and public opinion becomes more volatile and seducible. In the end, the public will collapse into a collection of digital root tables, each with their own political truth. That would be the beginning of the end of democracy." (Spiewak, 2018).

Public today relies on the media more heavily than ever before, in particular with the wide Internet access worldwide. But as Heywood emphasizes, there are many pros and cons for this process of profound impact of new digital or computer technologies on society and politics. ICT can be a motor for decentralization and democracy, but it may debase politics and threaten freedom. New technologies massively enlarge citizens' access to information, making possible, for the first time, a truly free exchange of ideas and views. The internet makes available to private citizen's specialist information that was once only available to governments. (Heywood, 2013). Access to information by online sources is almost instantaneous and exposes the public to a rich diversity of views, including radical and dissident ones. But, besides the fact that knowledge is power, there are numerous dangers of 'information anarchy'. The new media opened up spaces that were instantly attacked by the certain views and style of expression that conflicts the liberal and democratic standards of society. In the process of struggle to attract public attention, the Internet was used as a place for the attitudes of the racist, religious fundamentalists, ethnic nationalists and numerous extremists.

3. Fake news and media literacy

Due to fast technological development, the ongoing debate about what content of the mass media should and what should not be available to the general public is inevitable. 'Mankind, in general, judge more by their eyes than their hands; for all can see the appearance, but few can touch the reality.' (Machiavelli, 1532). The media are much more than a channel of communication because they affect the society and life in general, and very often they become part of them.

In this *information apocalypse* it is becoming almost impossible for ordinary people to detect manipulation made by photoshopping and video manipulation. In the need for sixth sense, we will have to develop techniques to make a difference between what is real and what is fake. Innovation is not always morally neutral. The technological development has "dual use".

Nuclear physics gave us both energy and bombs. What *is* new is the democratisation of advanced IT, the fact that anyone with a computer can now engage in the weaponisation of information (Shariatmadari, 2018). The power of fake news, accompanied with

Internet conspiracy theories and lies were used for both Brexit and Donald Trump in 2016. With new computer programs developed at Stanford University, there is an opportunity to make public figure pronounce words that they have never said. As an effect will the public believe them or not? We will become unable to trust what we see or hear. Misinformation became part of our human interaction and therefore it became target of critics about exploitation of news and misleading stories going around the internet. With the popularization of hundreds of social media outlets, the problem has become even worse.

Media literacy has become a center of gravity for countering "fake news". (Bulger&Davison,2018). According to the Center for Media Literacy, it is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. It provides techniques to use critical thinking skills to recognize differences between real and "fake" news. Fake news are stories that appear to be news, but are in fact false or misleading. However, media literacy is nothing new, and neither are fake news. In fact, humans have manipulated and fabricated information for centuries—to persuade, confuse, and entertain.

"Media literacy is as central to active and full citizenship as literacy was at the beginning of the 19th century," considers Information Society and Media Commissioner Viviane Reding. This new form of literacy is expected to detect fake from real in this *information apocalypse*. The ongoing battle between free speech and fake news does not have an ending in sight. "The fact that there is a rise of flat-Earthers is a sign of two things: One, we live in a country which protects free speech, and two: we live in a country with a failed educational system" (deDrasse Tyson, 2018). False information is nothing new in the public sphere. New technology however, is the new channel through which they are now massively displayed and shared, and protected by the first amendment in the US, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and any Constitution of a liberal democracy. Besides being legally impossible to prevent false information from spreading, it is also difficult to draw the line of what would stay and what would go online, as well as the question *who* would draw it. There is a fine line between censorship due to fake news versus autocratic governance, as much as there is a fine line between free speech and fake news. Education and political participation is still the "deal breaker" regarding how things would evolve, as it was in the past. Its shortage or surplus in a population will be the ultimate cure or death, respectively.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon. Yellow Journalism existed long before the 'fake news' term appeared. Propaganda was more familiar and used. For example, during World War II the United States used propaganda on American citizens to rally the country. And Adolf Hitler was a master of 'fake news'. Media literacy is not a new phenomenon either. In the 1930s, an ex-journalist named Clyde Miller started the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which designed curriculum for educators to teach students to recognize seven different propaganda devices. One was "glittering generalities," defined as "an attempt to sway emotions through the use of shining ideals or virtues, such as freedom, justice, truth, education, democracy in a large, general way." Media literacy concepts are familiar for schools for decades, but obviously never in an environment like this one, where owning a printing press or TV satellite isn't needed to quickly and widely disseminate information. In addition, this was combined with hyperpartisan politics

and the results led to the weaponization of news by individuals, political groups, and foreign countries. The old tools of media literacy—source checking, relying on known outlets— aren't enough when a hacker in Macedonia can easily create a website that looks legitimate, then quickly make thousands of dollars from advertising as bogus stories circulate. Scrolling through social media feeds produces one challenge after another, from the serious to the mundane (Rosenwald, 2017).

The field of media literacy in its current form took shape starting in the late 1970s, with systematic efforts toward curricular development and research (Arke, 2012). While definitions of media literacy remain fluid and contested (Anderson, 2008; Abreu, Mihailidis, Lee, Melki, & McDougall, 2017), media historian Edward Arke identifies the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy as a moment when media literacy education scholars and practitioners agreed to the definition of media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Aufderheide, 1993).

Renee Hobbs, who is a Leading media literacy theorist, in a body of work spanning over three decades, describes media literacy as a fluid practice that is both individual and communal and not simply inoculation against negative messaging but empowerment to engage with media as citizens (Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs, 2010; Hobbs, 2017). This view of media literacy as a multi-faceted, flexible, and empowering response is reflected in media literacy programs throughout the US across five thematic areas: youth participation, teacher training, parental support, policy initiatives, and evidence bases. (Bulger&Davison, 2018).

Social inclusion and democratic participation rely on opportunities to access, express and share information as citizens. The extent to which misinformation can undermine these opportunities legitimises both concerns about fake news as symptomatic of information disorder, and discussions on what should be done. As such, as our engagement with information is increasingly mediated by the internet, discussions about how to promote critical literacy in the digital age are imperative. Everyone has a responsibility to learn critical literacy online and offline. Particularly vulnerable to online risks – from cyberbullying to inappropriate content – children are expected more than anyone else to engage reflectively with digital media. While critical literacy is about questioning information, authority and power, it is not sufficient in the digital age. Familiarity with digital features and design can also come in handy when evaluating information. More importantly, "critical digital literacy is not only about evaluating online content but also understanding the internet's production and consumption processes, its democratising potential and its structural constraints" (Polizzi, 2017).

Distrustful media and fake news have to be tackled in a variety of ways. First, media literacy has to become inevitable part of our children education. The education system needs to be based on training teachers and providing resources for stimulating students' ability to questions information they receive. The media literacy can be included in the curriculum of different subjects, such as native language, history, citizenship education or computer science lessons. They can affect students to develop critical attitude towards online and offline information, which is crucial for clear understanding of the digital environment. Media literacy or media education is already implemented in many countries such as Germany, Austria, UK, USA and their success in education is based in cross-discipline nature of media literacy which is provided by different school subjects coverage.

The education system has to be supported by the role of the parents, who have a hard task to keep the balance between protection of their children from online risks and allowing them to use online opportunities. Parents also need media education, so that they can reflect their knowledge

and become better educators for their children. The process of learning can be provided both for parents and children, so that they can reach the common goal.

Second, high-tech companies are expected to work on technological fixes by producing algorithms that can detect fake news. This is very problematic due to the fact that it is hard to define what is misinformation, how to grade reliability and scrutinize content. The machines today are not ready to distinguish the content between satire and deliberately or inadvertently fabricated. Additionally, technological fixes and monitoring beg questions about transparency and privacy. And it's not just social media networks like Facebook and Twitter that spread fake news. Recently, the Blue Whale suicide game was leading young people towards death and the fact checking platforms failed to find evidence for this damage.

Third, regulation of media should become a priority. The fake news phenomenon shows the urgent need for new policies tackling this issue. It is a duty for policymakers, together with experts and academics to work on the content of regulations, and a proper 'post fake news' approach where the public may be informed for the truth. Right information for the citizens will result with right political decisions when they vote and delegate power to politicians. This includes political literacy, together with digital literacy, as one aspect of the media literacy, since the political communication and civic engagement happen with the assistance of the digital technologies.

4. New threats to traditional news

The traditional business model for delivering news is in a crisis. As the established news organizations see decline of audience because of increasing competition from new types of suppliers and observe the growth of online advertising, some are predicting the near collapse of the current news environment. They are in a crisis because the younger population is leaving them for Internet and social media, advertisers are targeting audiences online and traditional channels have lost their monopoly and privileged position of delivering the world to their audiences.

If we follow the simple supply demand rule, more news sources disperse the viewers. More sources lead to less advertising, but also to more quantity, which does not often go hand in hand with more quality.

There are another threats for the future of the society and democracy that appear in our lives and are accepted as a normal development due to the advanced technology. The rise of "citizen-journalists", online journalism in exchange for newspapers, websites as news channels for every NGO managed by workers with lacking journalist experience, education and expertise, sloppy amateur news, taken out of context, at some cases opinions mistaken as facts and presented as such, are a danger for the future of the society and democracy, as much as fake news are. The limitless opportunities for anyone to have their say on anything, is directed to result in opinion replacing hard-won gains of investigative journalism. The general public will have to choose what is relevant and trustful information because Internet as a space remains vey often not sufficiently regulated.

Another issue and danger is the emergence of "dumbed down" journalism. Since more competition has lead news companies to put viewership as their number one priority, the context of news will be inevitably subject to dramatization, simplification, personalization and polarization. As a former journalist writes: "Journalism stands accused of sacrificing accuracy for speed, purposeful investigation for cheap intrusion and reliability for entertainment. 'Dumbed down' news media are charged with privileging sensation over significance and celebrity over achievement" (Hargreaves, 2003).

When it comes to media, globalization caused concentration of ownership and technology transformation, but also entertainment-driven news. The audience is bigger but dispersed, and targeting a specific, small group of audience to become a paper's loyal readers is very difficult, due to the geographical and cultural mobility that globalization offers. On the other hand, regradless the level of cultural, national, religious and opinion diversity of the audience, the majority is always eager to get updated on controversial and popular issues. Professional journalists are forced to report on issues that are below them in order to keep their jobs. "Old news" values are replaced by populist value. In an intensely competitive environment, news companies depend on a degree of sensationalism in order to gain more viewers.

The third outcome of the increased competitiveness through the Internet is the new burden for journalists to report and write more pieces in less time for the same money. (Freedman, 2010). Due to time and deadline pressures, the journalist values such as objectivity and accuracy, as well as the investigative part of being a journalist has been put aside. In order to keep up with the tight schedule, they are forced to copy paste a lot from their rivals and constantly check up on them on whether they are missing out a certain story. This practice of reporters rewriting stories, which have appeared elsewhere, is leading to greater homogenization of news content. As it turns out, the Internet is narrowing the perspective of many reporters. Based on this point of view, the overall effect of the Internet on journalism is to provide weakening collection of the same old sources, though in newer bottles. (Philipps, 2010).

A new trend that has emerged is increasing inclusiveness of the viewers and readers in the news industry, by providing spaces for discussion online. (Couldry, 2010). The low point of this innovation is the lack of accountability and anonymity of those responding online, because it leads to concerns of verification, accountability and accuracy. The interactive and participative nature of the web means that anyone can be a journalist with the right tools. Civic journalism is increasing and access to public information is expanding. Citizen journalism is interrupting mainstream journalism and vice versa. Whether amateur journalists will replace professional ones, like Uber did with Taxi drivers, decrease their monopoly position in the industry and make their jobs more demanding, depends on the audience. If the audience's political culture is participative, two kinds of people will occur: the first ones, who believe in that even though amateurs, "citizen- journalists" and the NGO-sector are genuine and not profit-driven, unlike news companies and perceive them as a decent source of information. The second ones respect the involvement of the NGO sector and the development of civil society, but rely on traditional news channels with credibility acquired through many years of delivering the world to the society. Thus, for them a coverage from these sources is a crucial factor supposed to determine the significance and truthfulness of the information. This means, that even if the general public's political culture is at its best form i.e. participative, the future of this profession is still turbulent. Another reason to worry for the preservation of their jobs would be the widely required tech knowledge. Owners are ready to give priority to an amateur or incompetent journalist who can

manage well with the newest technology instead of a professional with little or no technological skills. It is costly to teach someone IT skills in contrast to teaching a mediocre reporter or a random person with no back round related to journalism how to the do the rest part of his job, besides using IT skills, which has lowered standards already.

5. Conclusion

The current political and media environment urgently needs introducing media literacy. New media literacy initiatives are needed together with raising awareness of media messages. Citizens should be aware how to manage a critical approach towards messages delivered by the media in a digital environment. Still, from an evidence perspective, there remains uncertainty around whether media literacy can be successful in preparing citizens to resist "fake news" and disinformation. Latest findings identify five broad recommendations for future development of media literacy: a) develop a coherent understanding of the media environment, b) improve cross-disciplinary collaboration, c) leverage the current media crisis to consolidate stakeholders, d) prioritize the creation of a national media literacy evidence base, e) develop curricula for addressing action in addition to interpretation (Bulger&Davison, 2018). It seems like a long way to go before these goals are reached, but at least some efforts may change the general landscape when it comes to media literacy.

The globalization digitalized our society and it dictates a dynamic development. This process is irreversible, and it has strong impact on the media as a vital part of democratic societies. Fake news is often published on websites that seem credible, and use social media for distribution. Recognizing them is not always an easy task. Today's misinformation resembles the true information, has the same form, but does not contain the truth. Common action of all stakeholders is required in the creation and production of news, and this action should include the state, the media, education system at all levels and the civil sector. Raising the level of media literacy is a reachable goal, but we have to be aware that there is no easy way. Professional media should no longer be just information producers, but they now have to educate the audience. By doing so, they will build their own integrity and trust.

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