

Editorial

(Dis)Information Literacy: A Democratic Right and Duty of All Citizens

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Abstract

When the call for papers for this issue was made a few months ago, disinformation literacy to defend our democracies was already seen as having great importance. Today, when hybrid warfare (of which information disorder is a key part) is being waged, with deaths and destruction inflicted on European soil, it is clearly not only important but also urgent. Our democracies and freedoms are at stake. In a scenario where, on the one hand, labels (“audience,” “prosumers,” “media,” “fake news,” “post-truth”) and on the other hand, the realities that these labels hide are changing and are modified so quickly, different institutions that structure the democratic societies must converge in the construction of effective information literacy strategies. Schools and the entire formal education system must be the first, of course. Universities must lead this fight, combining their teaching and research mission with their work relating to dissemination and social awareness, especially from communication studies and colleges of journalism. In parallel to educational and research institutions, media also play a crucial role in promoting (dis)information literacy. As media educators, they should not only serve the mercantilist objective of retaining their clientele but also uphold their democratic responsibility to help instill a sense of civic awareness in citizens.

Keywords

democracy; disinformation; hybrid war; information disorder; information literacy; post-truth; resilience

Issue

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1. Introduction

Disinformation is posing a significant threat to the stability of our democracies. The liberal democratic order, over which the law and our norms reign, is in crisis. There are many internal factors that have caused it, as well as external ones. The disinformation attacks suffered daily by democratic societies can destabilize governments, electoral processes, and referendums of all kinds; non-democratic societies and governments may view these attacks as an opportunity to exploit the situation for their own gain.

It is true that fake news is a great human tradition (Lagarde & Hudgins, 2018) and has often been decisive in the historical development of countries, continents, and the whole world (McIntyre, 2018; O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019). It is not for nothing that Buonanno (2019) calls lies “the violent creator of

History.” Machiavelli would consider it a consubstantial part of political practice (Villanueva, 2021), and the Tuscan author should be taken on his word on countless occasions. Especially in the 20th century, a century largely devastated by its extensive and intense cycles of war and ideological frenzies, to use Conquest’s terms (2001), seasoned by a propaganda full of lies (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013).

In this amalgam, journalism and the media must also sing a certain mea culpa. As Gelfert (2018) states, *fake journalism* has existed since the 19th century. Legendary is the case of the series of news stories that appeared in *The Sun* in 1835, which reported the existence of the inhabitants of the Moon, sighted through a supposed telescope of enormous power. For some, this story will be the first *fake news* in history *stricto sensu* (Salas Abad, 2019), from which all the William Randolph Hearst in the history of journalism will drink.

It seems, therefore, that *nihil novum sub sole* (nothing new under the sun) as we reach the third decade of the 21st century. But the truth is that there is one factor that has changed everything, or almost everything. It is digitalization and the new ecosystem in which our daily lives are immersed (Jacomella, 2017; Levitin, 2017; Williams, 2021). The digital injects disinformation with an unparalleled capacity for massive, ubiquitous, and instantaneous destruction—with a smaller monetary cost than ever before.

Floridi (2014), of the Oxford Internet Institute, goes further. He says that contemporary digital technologies have left behind even history itself as a concept. Just as the absence of all kinds of information and communication technologies (ICTs) marked prehistory, and history itself was “synonymous with the information age,” the author describes the current digital and algorithmic era as *hyperhistory*. That is, a new human macro-period in which ICTs are now working autonomously and in which our well-being is no longer connected to them but depends directly and completely on them. We would be becoming what Lassalle (2019) calls an assisted humanity, with an equally assisted freedom that anchors us to a perpetual minority of age with respect to machines, living an *onlife* existence immersed in an *infosphere* largely independent of the human being himself (Floridi, 2014). It should be noted that the latter authors wrote all this long before the arrival of generative AI, which has become so massively popular in recent months.

2. Focusing and Unfocusing the Phenomenon

This issue opens with the more than relevant debate on the adverse consequences, unintentional or maybe intended, of emphasizing the threats of disinformation disorder. Putting too much focus on the problem, it is true, perhaps magnifies it. The denunciation of disinformation is becoming its ally. If the threat is perceived as constant, the citizen may take a defensive posture by default to everything that reaches them, and no matter how true a news item may be, it may not be free from the suspicions of a perhaps “too” alert population. Perhaps the main objective of this massive *infosmog* is not so much that we believe the lies but that we stop believing in the truth, in the truth of reliable and verifiable facts. Can, therefore, disinformation literacy affect trust in information? It is an interesting debate opened by Hameleers (2023) in his article.

In the same line, both the article by Rodríguez-Ferrándiz (2023) and the one by Pérez-Escobar et al. (2023) attempt to frame conceptually and terminologically the disinformation phenomenon by analyzing different types of sources. The phenomenon of disinformation and the misnamed fake news has become tremendously mainstream nowadays and requires constant scientific observation and reification, which takes into account the fickleness of the phenomenon. As the latter authors stress, it is important to analyze how

scientific observation is approaching the issue since the way society and the relevant institutions deal with the problem may depend to a large extent on this scientific knowledge.

The reframing proposed by Paolucci (2023) is also interesting. With an approach from semiotics, he proposes an analysis of post-truth and disinformation phenomena that involves a profound change of conception, focusing particularly on the relationship of all this with power, and how to a large extent, this relationship will mark the consideration and nature of the problem.

3. Resilience, Democracy, and Media

If we circumscribe the problem of disinformation to the field of politics, we are faced with a scenario that Hendrix and Carroll (2017) unequivocally describe as a real nightmare for democracy today. O’Neil (2016) warned of the very serious democratic danger posed by social networks and other digital giants’ algorithms. More recently, Messa (2019) analyzed the disinformation phenomenon from the perspective of a global cyberwar deployed under the well-known Gerasimov doctrine or hybrid war model, in which the information disorder is one more front in the military interest of weakening the “enemy” from the inside.

Not surprisingly, one of the main “feats” of hoaxes and fake news is the extreme fragmentation of public opinion and social polarization within a society, state, or nation (Tambuscio et al., 2015). Something that is enhanced, in turn, by a society made up of small tribes scattered in the plankton of the infinite ocean of the internet and social networks (Ferraris, 2019).

Williams (2021, p. 91) states that among the essential faculties for exercising democracy are “reflection, memory, prediction, calmness, logic, and goal setting.” Without all this, the individual and society become less resilient to disinformative attacks. We must also look at the media themselves and ask ourselves what they have done and have failed to do in this regard—and what they should do. One of the main culprits for the lack of media legitimacy and trust is the media themselves, as Rodríguez-Pérez and Canel (2023) point out in their article. Therefore, media legitimacy and trust in them are essential for the citizens’ resilience to misinformation in any democracy.

To construct and maintain legitimacy and trust, the media should perhaps go even further, as Sengl and Heinke (2023) point out, and assume the role of “media educators,” in the words of these authors. Even if it were only for the mere mercantilist objective of guaranteeing a certain clientele and creating within them a desire to read newspapers and an attachment to newspapers or serious media, this alone would imply fulfilling the democratic duty of forming and fostering a minimally qualified and literate audience able to discern quality information from what is not.

4. Patterns of Vulnerability

If disinformation roams freely, it is also because there are patterns of vulnerability of which its spreaders take advantage. In this sense, the role played by intrinsic human cognitive biases is decisive (Matute, 2018). Biases are enhanced in turn by digital platforms and their algorithms, as we know today very well. In this issue, Disha et al. (2023) and Luo et al. (2023) carry out two interesting experimental studies on biases of different kinds and their ability to consider certain content as false or not.

In parallel, the habitat of continuous alerts and warnings in which a contemporary individual is immersed fosters a continuous flow of fragmented, decontextualized content at a dizzying pace. This is the business model on which the main agents of the new digital economy are based: human attention as the main commodity or raw material (Williams, 2021), engagement. Or rather, we could speak of *inattention* since this is what the overabundance of stimulation induces. And if the attentional capacity of the human being is diminished, the architecture of the whole human psyche wobbles, as William James, the father of modern psychology, warned many decades ago (James, 1890).

This “unattentive model” anchors us firmly in what Levitin (2017) calls the “breaking news mode of thinking.” Thus, it banishes other “scientific research modes of thinking” that should guide many of our decisions, those which enable us to determine, among other things, the authenticity of the messages and content that reach us. It is the absolute triumph of fast thinking—if it can be called thinking—over slow thinking, to sum it up in the words of Kahneman (2011). It is in this breeding ground where conspiracy thinking feeds, addressed in his text by Terracciano (2023).

The surprising thing is that, to a large extent, all this is happening not only with the knowledge and acceptance of the citizens but even with their enthusiasm. Or at least with total indifference to the possible adverse consequences, especially among the younger population.

5. Conclusion

Lassalle (2019, p. 74) stated emphatically that the latest wave of the digital revolution seemed to be decisive in the “collapse of the liberal narrative,” which can be identified as democratic. And he was saying this before Covid-19, before Putin’s invasion and the war in Ukraine, and before the mass irruption of generative AI, as noted above.

Truth and freedom are Siamese twins. In a world where algorithms decide for us, making our lives easier and more comfortable, we are no longer afraid of freedom, but we simply despise it. Poor Erich Fromm. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a good number of today’s liberal democracies, the percentage of citizens who consider it “essential” to live in a democracy (in freedom) has plummeted in recent years (Williams, 2021).

Like so many other things, what we are given in life is not valued until lost. That is why disinformation literacy should start with this aspect: fostering attachment to democratic values and stressing the importance of preserving the information order for democracy. Conservation is the responsibility of politicians, (traditional) media, and digital platforms, but also the duty of each and every citizen.

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Conflict of Interests

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