


Special Issue: Media Literacy to Tackle Disinformation

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This OBS* Special Issue has been developed under IBERIFIER, Iberian Media Research and Fact-Checking, project funded by the EC under the European Digital Media Observatory initiative, CEF-TC-2020-2, grant number 2020-EU-IA-0252. The “Media literacy” subgroup has assumed during the project duration the challenge of identifying and addressing the special needs that journalists and teachers are facing to effectively tackle disinformation. While journalists are dealing with disinformation in a daily basis, teachers have an essential role training younger generations to face successfully with this kind of contents. To help them, IBERIFIER team has been developing materials, activities, and sessions during the last three years. But research perspective is also essential to fully understand the phenomenon and new evidence could help to define practices and policies aiming to contribute to a better professional and social environment. The purpose of this issue was precisely to gather a significant number of contributions on how media literacy efforts are resonating in academia.

In a media context where citizens admit to being in contact with disinformation phenomena, but where the vast majority admit to not always feeling ready to recognise it (European Parliament, 2022), the effects of disinformation tend to increase. These include increased polarisation and heightened political or religious persecution, growing lack of trust in democratic institutions, influence on decision-making or the possible effect on election and referendum outcomes (Sádaba & Salaverria, 2023). As a corollary, responsiveness to global problems is also reduced, as was the case during COVID-19 (Leshner, Pawelec & Desai, 2022).

To combat disinformation and reduce the effects of its consequences, several solutions have been proposed, both technological (developing technologies to detect disinformation and supporting fact-checkers), political (addressing emerging challenges such as content moderation, demanding transparency from platforms and guidance to act against generators and disseminators of disinformation) and also educational (improving scientific communication and investing in media literacy) (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023; Heath, 2021). Combating the consequences of disinformation is a social challenge in which actors from all fields - technological, legislative, and educational - have a role to play.

A complex problem like disinformation requires coordinated efforts (Cucarella & Fuster, 2022). Media and journalists role is essential to combat disinformation and not promote it (Foá et al, 2023; Galdón-López, 1994), and the emergence of fact-checkers all over the world during the last years can be seen as an urgent response due to the amount and intensity of disinformative content (Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). While very

useful and necessary (Carnahan & Bergan, 2022), the effect of fact-checkers is not enough (Margolin, Hannak & Weber, 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch et al, 2020).

As a complement to the strategies against disinformation based on information verification, the efforts of governments and institutions to confront the negative consequences of the phenomenon increase (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Media literacy, in this context, underlines the need to provide citizens with personal resources and capabilities to confront their own prejudices in the first place, and disinformation strategies, and it has emerged as a crucial capacity to ensure a healthy digital usage.

This is why this issue turns its focus on media literacy (in Global South understood as a synonym of educommunication), not only as an instrument to combat disinformation, but in an integral logic (Frau-Meigs, 2022) of lifelong learning, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. A media literacy that seeks to promote learning, developing creative skills, communication, critical thinking, and the ability to participate in the public sphere (Hobbs, 2022).

In the specific case of media literacy training in formal learning contexts, it is important to highlight the roles to be played by different actors, from school leadership to families and tutors, media professionals, civil society, and the community (European Commission, 2022).

Media literacy efforts have bloomed during the last years, addressing strategies and practices for prevention, early identification, subsequent verification and combating misinformation and its dissemination. Besides addressing the younger audiences, there are new efforts to reach other vulnerable groups as senior citizens, which could be less equipped to face disinformation on its digital form (Sádaba et al., 2023). There is also an urgent call to the application of curricular proposals, projects, and practices, as well as community intervention initiatives with people of different age groups, involving professionals from different sectors that should be adapted to each cultural contexts.

The first article, authored by Viviane Ongaro, Monica Fantin and José Douglas Alves dos Santos, offers a reflection about young people perception of disinformative content in a Brazilian context. This sociocultural perspective allows more accurate reflections and ideas to improve media literacy activities.

Javier Abuín-Penas, Francisco Fernández-Medina and Juan-Manuel Corbacho-Valencia contribute, second of this issue, takes into consideration the IberoAmerican fact-checkers role as promoters of media literacy. Their knowledge makes those actors particularly relevant.

The third article of this Special Issue has been authored by Luísa Torre, Pedro Jerónimo and Inês Amaral, who remarks the potential contribution to tackling disinformation through media literacy from journalists, with a special attention to the Portuguese professionals and their proposals.

The fourth contribution, from Miguel Paisana, Caterina Foà, António Vasconcelos, Paulo Couraceiro, Sofia Ferro Santos, Aldina Margato, Miguel Crespo, offers a broader perspective offering a taxonomy for the media literacy field in Portugal identifying actors, initiatives and practical proposals to address the problem.

One of the challenges to media literacy programs is how quickly digital technologies are changing. The article authored by Caterina Foà, Paulo Couraceiro and Ana Pinto-Martinho offers a preliminary study of the ability of Portuguese journalists to confront algorithms. But at the same time it is true that disinformation is a risk for the whole society, also for those less familiar with the digital platforms or contents. This is why the contributions of Luís Miguel Pato, Patrícia Torrijos Fincias, Cristóvão Margarido and Ricardo Pocinho, focused on how traditional television content could be effective to reach senior citizens, are particularly relevant.

With another cultural perspective, Auksė Balčytienė, Rimgailė Kasparaitė and Patricija Lenčiauskienė, article, delves around how journalism students could be trained and helped to develop epistemic agency through verification skills to combat disinformation.

Generating awareness about a problem and its possible solutions is always a challenge and Silvia Frota, Luísa Cortés and Amanda Melo point out in her article the essential role that media have in promoting media literacy.

Ana Filipa Oliveira, Margarida Maneta, Maria José Brites e Vanessa Ribeiro-Rodrigues map the way Portugal has answered to disinformation and fake news since 2010 while Miriam Garriga, Raquel Ruiz and Raul Mangallon offer some literacy proposals against of the newest challenges, deepfakes.

The last contribution, authored by Juliana Colussi Ribeiro, Paula de Souza Paes, Rainer Rubira-García and Thays Assunção Reis does a comparative exploratory analysis of perceptions and competences about and against disinformation amongst communication students in Brazil, Colombia and Spain.

All these articles are relevant contributions to be taken into account and further research should be built upon or enrich the concepts and frameworks proposed by the authors. Media literacy is part of the solution to tackle disinformation, but the urgency of the current situation and the ever changing digital technology makes necessary the coordinated efforts (Tomé et al, 2023), and evidence-based decision making, to which academic research could be particularly helpful.

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