Article

Critical Literacy in the Post-Truth Media Landscape

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Abstract
In the post-truth era, information is harder to trust than ever before. News has become more about entertainment than information and consumers now subscribe to media in order to have their view reinforced and not challenged. The media environment has become more tribal, defining the people who consume it. On top of this environment, the plague that is fake news has descended upon the internet, making truth a relative concept rather than a scientific one. Navigating the media and finding truth in current events has become a confusing process.

In the wake of the major events of 2016 – Brexit and the United States election, two events that were defined by misinformation, lies and fake news – post-truth emerged as a political term to define the era we now live in. It is one where truth is of little value and people give in to the politics of emotion rather than fact. This sets a dangerous scene for democracy and threatens to undermine any major future democratic processes.

In order to alleviate this issue, a critical media literacy must be adopted in education. Students need to be given the tools to critically analyse media as well as understand the structures of power behind media organizations, what their goals are and who they serve. In doing so, fake news can lose much of its power and truth can emerge.

Keywords
Media literacy, fake news, post-truth, selective exposure theory, critical media literacy, propaganda

A lie that is half-truth is the darkest of all lies

-Alfred Tennyson, 1864

Introduction

Trent, Italy, 1475. A 2.5-year-old boy named Simonino goes missing. The residents, angry and scared, ask why he has disappeared. Bernardino da Feltre, a Franciscan preacher, offers

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the answer through his sermons: claiming that the body of the boy was found in a Jewish residence, he says that the Jewish community killed him, drained his blood and drank it to celebrate Passover. The rumour spreads through the city, provoking hate, fear and action. In response, the Prince-Bishop of Trent immediately orders the city's entire Jewish community arrested, tortured and forcefully converted to Christianity, culminating with 15 Jews being found guilty and burned at the stake. The story incites the surrounding communities to commit similar atrocities against the Jewish population. Although the Papacy attempted to halt the killings, the popular fervour surrounding da Feltre's allegations had become too strong and impossible to oppose. Da Feltre's narrative had become all the truth the mob required. Simonino was later canonized and the event became known as the Trento Blood Libel (Soll, 2016).

This story, and many more like it since time immemorial, shows the damage that unsubstantiated rumours and outright lies can cause. While using lies for the fermentation of hate and persecution is not a new idea, what are new are the technological methods with which lies can be broadcast, and the reach of those lies. In da Feltre's time, the pulpit was where the largely illiterate masses received their news as well as their salvation. In today's interconnected and globalized world, the advent of new media platforms such as television, digital media and the new ways in which information is created and consumed has created an environment in which lies can thrive and make public opinion more divided than ever.

In the wake of Brexit, the 2016 United States presidential election and the campaigning strategies and events surrounding them, Oxford Dictionaries chose *post-truth* as its word of the year. It is used to describe the political and media landscape of today, in terms such as 'post-truth politics' or the 'post-truth era'. Oxford Dictionaries defines the term as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016), a definition that sums up the process by which the Jews of Trent were targeted, as da Feltre knew the mob wanted an answer and he was not about to let a lie get in the way of a good scapegoat.

One of the main drivers contributing to the post-truth environment has been what is commonly referred to as fake news. Although fake news and 'post-truthiness' share many similarities and perhaps a symbiotic relationship, it is important to distinguish between the two. Post-truth signifies an epochal shift, with the prefix 'post' asserting that the time of truth has passed, while fake news is 'a snappy identifier of a kind of a fraudulent media product' (Corner, 2017: 1). These terms share the same basic commonality: inflammation of emotional appeal whilst disregarding truth.

Fake news was one of the most discussed topics around the 2016 presidential election. It has also been a hard term to miss, with the newly elected commander-in-chief bleating it out every time news is not to his liking. The phenomenon has had such an impact that many political commentators suggest that Hillary Clinton may have emerged as the victor had she not been targeted so heavily by fake news articles (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017) such as the 'Pizza-gate affair'. The story claimed that Clinton's emails showed that she and other members of the Democratic party were behind an elaborate human trafficking and child sex ring operating out of a chain of restaurants. The staff and owners of the restaurants received hundreds of threats, with one pizzeria having three rifle shots fired inside its building. When arrested, the shooter stated that he wished to 'self-investigate' the business after reading the article (Hsu, 2017). Fake news has real consequences, but not only for physical safety, democracy and the pursuit of empirical knowledge; the very existence of fake news as

a recognized effect allows all forms of media that do not agree with the chosen narrative of power to be labelled as fake news, marginalizing legitimate journalism.

It is important to note that the contemporary post-truth era has not been formed solely by fake news but by a range of different factors. This essay will however focus on and describe the contemporary digital fake news phenomenon, its goals, effects and how it has come about through partisanship's role in creating a media environment that has put emotion over fact. It will discuss how power is able to take advantage of the phenomenon to push its own agenda forward. A range of solutions combating fake news and how such solutions may have other ramifications on freedom of speech will be evaluated. The essay will finish by arguing that the public's development of a critical approach to media is the only effective solution to navigating media, fake or otherwise, in the post-truth era.

Defining fake news

It is important to define what exactly constitutes fake news, as today it is a label that gets thrown towards almost any media source. Allcott and Gentzkow's research on the relationship between social media and fake news in the 2016 election ruled out what they define as the 'several close cousins of fake news'. These examples are often mistaken as fake news, but there are key differences to understand:

1. unintentional reporting mistakes, such as a recent incorrect report that Donald Trump had removed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. from the Oval Office in the White House;
2. rumours that do not originate from a particular news article;
3. conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true);
4. satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual;
5. false statements by politicians; and
6. reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false". (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 5)

Fake news can be separated from these examples by its verifiably false nature, which deliberately attempts to mislead readers. It is the attempt to deceive that separates it from opinion pieces and accidental or erroneous reporting (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Corner, 2017; Levinson, 2017). Most often, fake news articles appear on websites whose links are spread through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, acting as an accelerant for distribution (D'Ancona, 2017) to appropriate readers as 'the targeting and crowd dynamics created by social media allows for ideas – true or otherwise – to spread faster than ever before' (Gu et al., 2007: 2). This targeting makes social media susceptible to the use of bots, which further generate attention to a story by automatically generating messages and even posting further misleading articles.

Articles with titles like 'Exclusive! Inside information!', such as '*George Soros: "I'm Going to Bring Down the US by Funding Black Hate Groups"*' are often used. They employ eye-catching features as 'clickbait', which makes content irresistible for those who may already have heard details of the story or wish to believe it, encouraging people to read and share. It is worth mentioning that, predominantly, the wave of digital fake news has catered mainly to right-wing consumers (Lazer et al., 2017).

The problem with this contemporary version of fake news is the difficulty of authenticating it as disinformation. The advent of the new digital media technologies has decentralized the publishing process, ushering in a new wave of citizen journalism. Originally, only the gatekeepers of major media corporations, who had resources such as capital, printing machines, distributors and subscribers, could have any real impact on the media landscape (Levinson, 2017; McLuhan, 1966). Although digital technology has broken the media production monopolies to a degree, it has allowed fake news to thrive, as with little or no training anybody can produce an authentic-looking website similar in appearance to any major news network. Levinson notes an important distinction between traditional and digital media: there is far less difference between what *The New York Times* website and blog looks like than *The New York Times* paper and a photocopied manuscript (2017: 4). Often, fake news sites hide in this way by masquerading as legitimate news sites by using their logo, formats and even a similar domain name like 'abc.*co*.com' as opposed to 'abc.com' (Hughes, 2016). This shows how the decentralization of media technology has aided the fake news process.

Fake news is at its core a new form of propaganda. When we think of propaganda we think of Soviet banners, Nazi salutes and Orwell. The main differences between what we would classically define as propaganda and fake news is that propaganda does not necessarily avoid truth, but attempts to persuade its consumers rather than informing them, generally with a pro-authority stance as traditionally seen in wartime (Martin, 1929). Fake news may not necessarily be how we classically think of propaganda, as state-sponsored and controlled forms of media, but the aims of propaganda and fake news are the same; that is, they appeal to the consumer's emotions rather than provide facts. Levinson states that:

> this appeal to emotion is also the essence of fake news, which goes one step further than appeal-authority propaganda, by making recipients feel they are now authorities on the subject by virtue of the false news they have received about it. (2017: 10)

However, in comparison with propaganda, fake news has one other major motivation in addition to the spread of disinformation: wealth accumulation. The biggest misconception made about fake news is to think it is all coordinated or even malicious in intent. Both state and non-state actors have had a role in the spread of fake news. Robert Mueller's Special Counsel investigation into Russian state-sponsored meddling in the 2016 presidential election and its findings have certainly confirmed that fake news can be used as a powerful weapon in sowing discontent and spreading misinformation by hostile nations (Al Jazeera, 2018). While this is significant in demonstrating how states may now conduct information warfare, often the producers of fake news may have little or no connection to the authorities they support or attack by publishing content. While the aim of creating fake news can be ideological, discriminatory or partisan, it is often to simply capitalize on revenue accumulated by advertisements on websites, which can be substantial (Dewey, 2016). In theory, the more enticing and interesting the article is, the more views it will have and the more money it will make (CNN, 2017). While this seems exploitative, the irony is that financial accumulation is the same motivation for almost any other major news organization, the only difference being the lack of truth inherent in fake news and the intention to deceive its consumers (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Levinson, 2017).

Selected media exposure

The explosion of media accessibility with the advent of the internet and technology has changed the very nature of news media. It has replaced what was an objective, un-entertaining environment into a subjective, polarizing and entertaining environment focused on boosting its audience, whether they are interested in current events or not.

The rise of partisan news networks and sites with heavy biases has added a layer of confusion and frustration among consumers (Avlon and Grusd, 2017; Rowe and Alexander, 2017). This has further established an atmosphere of news catering to both emotion and entertainment before fact. It has created an environment where, as the news becomes more biased and partisan, so do its viewers. In effect, this has changed media consumption into an exercise of selected exposure, where one looks at media to have one's opinions or views reinforced, rather than challenged. Consumers' perspectives become more hardened and entrenched in their own ideological camps, supported by their media of choice's narrative, dismissive of media that does not share one's view (Hart, et al., 2009). With the gatekeeper's role being extended to the many different media available, every perspective can be catered to because, ultimately, consumers are a demographic to sell news to, profit from and whose views can be catered to. It is this new media landscape that has fostered a suitable environment for fake news to be believed.

To understand the motives for this consumer bias, McLuhan (1964: 51–58) describes the parable of Narcissus, who, whilst gazing into a pool, believed that his reflection was another person entirely. Smitten by this image and unable to leave it, he lost the will to live. McLuhan compares this to today's technology in that 'gadgetry', the things we own and subscribe to, are a result of catering to our own self-image, and this can be seen in the emerging electronic culture. Subscribing to partisan media reflects the tale of Narcissus in the sense that consumers of media seek out familiar views to validate their perspectives and reinforce their identities. In a contemporary context, it is due to this search for ideological validation of one's views that fake news can take root in individuals who already subscribe to certain narratives that are supported by wilder fake news articles. While this relates to the concept of selective exposure, it also shows application of user agency in media consumption; that is, 'information does not have an intrinsic meaning independent of the user', but each consumer brings their own experiences and understanding to their consumption of the information (Logan, 2011). Partisan media directly caters to these personal experiences by tapping into the emotions that commonly surround them and this is made easier when there is a large audience of people having similar experiences.

Contemporary fake news has thrived on partisanship, particularly in the United States. Networks that traditionally supported right-wing partisanship, like *Fox News* or the *National Review*, are now supplemented by digital media such as *InfoWars* and *Breitbart* and many others that cater to even more extreme views (Lazer et al., 2017). This ongoing trend towards partisan and biased media has allowed fringe theory websites to become normalized and opened the door to consumer susceptibility to fake news. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017: 19), in their analysis of those who subscribe to conspiracy theories, rumours and fake news, found that 'partisan attachment is an important predictor of beliefs' .

In *The Phantom Public* (1925), Walter Lippmann stated that partisanship is the enemy of factual and rational debate and of democracy. He believes that the public cannot function as well-informed citizens in a democracy with high levels of partisanship in society. Moreover,

he asserts that 'the public acts only by aligning itself as the partisan of someone in a position to act executively' (1925: 134). In response to Lippmann's view, John Dewey in *The Public and its Problems* (1927) stated the public is not even in existence until negative issues arise that may affect them or there is an issue that the many feel requires attention. Dewey described this lack of unity as the 'many publics' and claimed that it is an effect of divisions within society as well as inherit differences of opinion, and this is reflected in the many different biases inherent in news media. He also asserted that the rise of new technologies and the change of pace in people's modern lives slow down participation in public life, distracting citizens from real engagement and involvement in current events. While he agreed with Lippmann that partisanship divides the public dangerously, he concluded that there have in fact always been such distractions in democracy and that the only way to overcome them was through rigorous communication to form the public into a cohesive group, beginning with education.

One hundred years before the emergence of digital technologies, Lippmann and Dewey both saw how partisanship divides the public into rigid ideologies. Alignment towards someone who already holds one's biases and views is the position that partisan media attempts to take; the informed authority. Partisan media makes consumers feel well informed and emotionally appealed to, as it feeds their biases and validates their views without requiring them to participate in any dialogue or investigation themselves to form their own opinion. Instead, partisan media offers ready-made political views and ideologies that its consumers can subscribe to. It is through the consumer's search for perspective validation, and blind subscription to others' views, that fake news can take hold in the absence of investigation, scepticism and critical thinking; tools that are abandoned through the consumption of partisan media (Avlon and Grusd, 2017; Lippmann, 1925). This concept is fundamental in understanding that partisan media has laid the groundwork for fake news to deceive the public effectively by stunting the consumer's need to think critically about information and changing the paradigm of news media consumption.

Fake news and its relationship to power

A free and independent press is often called the Fourth Estate, as its existence provides a theoretical check on power since journalism can hold power accountable to truth (Rowe and Alexander, 2017). This position has been enshrined within many democracies around the world and famously within the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. However, in recent years, journalism at large has come under attack due to the presence of partisanship and bias, with the fake news phenomenon aiding in this assault. Power has found a useful application for the fake news phenomenon. It has enabled the dismissal of legitimate news stories that speak against the narrative of power to be marginalized and labelled as fake news.

An example of using the fake news angle is present in the ongoing state violence towards the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar's Rakhine state, which the United Nations Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein has called 'a textbook example of ethnic cleansing' (United Nations News Service, 2017). Despite numerous reports of genocidal acts and almost one million (as of 2018) Rohingya fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh, the de facto leader of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi, has denounced such reports, stating that 'fake news is generated because the government is not allowing media access to the troubled areas' (BBC, 2017). Suu Kyi's contradictory statement essentially amounts to 'you don't know

what's going on, because we won't let you know, nor do we want to'. Despite this, the vast numbers of people fleeing into Bangladesh and various reports of burning villages, rape and extrajudicial killings make such a denial implausible. This shows that the very existence of the fake news phenomenon provides a flawed yet convenient excuse for inconvenient news not suiting the narrative of power (Levitin, 2017).

Fake news became established as a keyword in the 2016 United States election. Over the last two years we have seen the then Trump campaign, now administration, label major news outlets as fake news:

> The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People! (Trump, 2017)

This narrative not only gave the President an excuse to maximize his Twitter usage against the media, but also prompted the Trump campaign to create its own news programme on Facebook called 'Real News Update'. The programme, hosted by Lara Trump and others, gives the Trump camp's own version of events in the governance of the United States. Content exclusively details the achievements of the President and his administration. In her first broadcast, Mrs Trump stated, 'I bet you haven't heard about all the accomplishments the President had this week because there's so much fake news out there' (Vitali, 2017). What is so insidious about this platform is its intentional imitation of mainstream media. The news reader is in the classical position –medium close up, to the side of the screen – that a news anchor would be in, with a picture on the top corner showing images of the topic being talked about. There is even a bar for subscriptions on the bottom of the screen that resembles a 'news ticker' normally found on any news channel. It is this imitation of mainstream media to make it appear as news media that makes the programme so deliberately deceptive. While Trump TV does not fit Allcott and Gentzkow's definition of fake news, it is pushing its overtly partisan and biased narrative as a real alternative to mainstream legitimate media sources. Using the guise of giving an alternative to fake news, it provides a kind of neo-propaganda.

More locally in my hometown of Hamilton, New Zealand, City Councillor Garry Mallett, who allegedly made references to 'fags' and 'homos' over pink paper used in council agenda, made use of the fake news method. When formal complaints were made by his colleagues, Mallett replied, 'First of all, this is *fake news*. Secondly, I have apologised for any offence. As far as I am concerned, it's an absolute wild goose chase' (as cited in Wilson, 2017). Mallet's comments show a colourful self-contradiction: first, by denying the accusation, then affirming that the comment was said by apologising for it, and finishing by essentially denying and marginalizing the story further by calling it a 'goose chase'.

Herein lies one of the biggest threats fake news poses: power's use of it to marginalize legitimate journalism. These examples show application of Herman and Chomsky's theory of the fourth media filter of flak. Flak is explained as 'negative responses to a media statement or program' (1988: 26) which cause the media source to be dismissed. The comments of these individuals show how fake news has entered the lexicon of contemporary political language; a kind of 'Newspeak' almost (Orwell, 1949). It exposes one of the most dangerous ramifications of fake news and the post-truth era: the marginalization of legitimate news stories whose narrative does not suit power. These efforts attempt to subvert the role of investigative journalism in democracy by using the spectre of fake news as an excuse to push their own version of events, turning the public against the mainstream media in the process.

Dealing with fake news

Fake news has now been recognized as an epidemic in digital media; dividing points of view, its use as political strategy can do real harm to both people and the practice of democracy (Lazer et al., 2017). Following the charges laid by Robert Mueller's investigation against 13 Russian nationals and three companies charged with meddling in the United States election, Deputy Attorney General Rod J. Rosenstein said in an official Justice Department state- ment in February that 'the indictment alleges that the Russian conspirators want to promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy' (as cited in The Washington Post, 2018).

Already, countries are beginning to act to counter its influence (Deutsche Welle, 2017). Fact-checking websites, black/whitelisting, and the shutting down of fake news websites have all been proposed as solutions. The private sector's selection of websites on which to advertise is also thought to be a way in which fake news can lose its audience. While there are many options for attempting to deal with fake news, there are inherent risks to freedom of speech and journalistic independence if these solutions are not carefully evaluated.

An answer often given is to simply shut down fake news websites. This is not as simple as it seems, as literally hundreds of fake news sites can spring up and be shared on social media more quickly than they can be taken down. But should they be shut down? In the West, where we value our freedom of speech and personal liberty to speak truth to power, shutting down sites that publish fake news would pose two major risks.

The first is that freedom of speech, encapsulated in laws such as the First Amendment, would be directly threatened. This is especially troubling when we think about the number of legitimate news stories that are already marginalized by power. Such an action would likely escalate, potentially allowing any media organization to be shut down if its content proves inconvenient to power by being labelled as fake news (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2017).

The second risk is that only selected and approved news media organizations would be allowed to operate, effectively 'whitelisting' what is deemed an acceptable media source. If news sites did not conform to what would be the publishing or broadcast norms, they too would be shut down or marginalized. Black/whitelisting raises yet another question: who decides what is a legitimate media source? This introduces a new set of gatekeepers in the publication of news content and is essentially a form of censorship. The United Nations recognizes this limitation and states that such actions 'which are imposed by a government and which are not end-user controlled are not justifiable as a restriction on freedom of expression' (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2017: 1).

Fact-checking websites such as *PolitiFact* have often been viewed as a viable solution to combat fake news as they purport to offer an unbiased dissemination of political statements and journalism. However, it must be asked, what authority do fact-checking systems have over other websites? (Graves, 2016) Are *Snopes.com* or *Factcheck.org* not also media organ- izations with their own obligations and stakeholders? Fact-checking media sites may be a step in the right direction as their goal is accountability and truth, but they cannot be confused with having absolute epistemological authority or being a check on power as the media system itself encourages conformity, in this case for the fact checkers themselves (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

John Avlon, Editor-in-Chief of *The Daily Beast*, argues that many advertisers, who essentially control the funding of the media, are cautious about where they advertise and

often do not want to have their products advertised on fake news sites or their relatives (Avlon and Grusd, 2017). He cautions, however, that brands often view 'hard news', such as real-world events or crises, as unsafe for advertising because of the polarization of the views and potential negativity surrounding these events, which can result in loss of revenue for media sources providing this kind of coverage. After all, big brands do not want to be associated with negativity; they want their product to be as appealing and positive as possible. This is a danger to a well-informed public as it has the potential to shift consumer focus towards 'infotainment' and 'light news'. As well as diminishing hard news content, this allows the private business community to decide which sites flourish and which do not by their choice of advertising options. With the power of advertising as the lifeblood of mainstream media, this threat is already very real, as stories that are inconvenient for advertisers easily result in the organization losing money and becoming further marginalized (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Johnston, 2000).

Herman and Chomsky (1988) assert that at its core the news media is a business whose focus is revenue. An interesting way to look at this idea is that if mainstream media is a business and information is the product, should consumers not expect the same standards of product authenticity and quality control that consumers expect from any other product? In this case is there a need for a 'Consumer Guarantee Act' in journalism? An independent authority that effectively monitors deception and truth in the media? Who is it run by? Government? This concept starts to sound a lot like Orwell's (1949) Ministry of Truth; the organization that controls all forms of media, history, education and entertainment to suit the party's narrative.

With each solution, we come to the same problem: 'Who watches the Watchmen?' (Moore, 1987). How does power governing journalism remain unbiased and focused on truth while being either a governmental or private organization? Any media controllers at the end of the day would have interests, whether they be financial, political or ideological. Media censorship now would likely lead to further media suppression in the future. Allowing power to dictate the direction of journalism, under the guise of stemming the tide of fake news, sets a dangerous precedent in the effort of speaking truth to power and ultimately gives control of media publication to that power. Do journalists make mistakes? Yes. Will some lie or attempt to deceive consumers? Yes; deception is a trait unlikely to leave society any time soon. The more important question to ask in the solution for fake news is: 'Is the media free?' (Herman and Chomsky, 1998) To summarize, it is the lack of control of the press that may ensure its freedom (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014). The concept of shutting down fake news websites, especially by power or a central authority, cannot be compatible with freedom of speech or the press. It is an extreme response to a problem that can be solved with a basic understanding of media processes.

Media literacy

Understanding that fake news cannot be subdued without a great deal of censorship, without diminishing free speech and ultimately letting power decide what is news and what is not, is an inherent reality. Ceding control of media filtering to private or government bodies will always leave room for corruption and manipulation. Dewey's (1916) philosophy is that a well-informed public is vital for democratic society, but democracy is a useless exercise if citizens do not have access to the truth to make well-informed decisions, and it is made

further irrelevant if the truth itself cannot be trusted or verified. It is through developing media literacy that we can obtain the tools to verify or dismiss information.

News media is more diverse, accessible, entertaining and confusing than ever before. Traditional education systems, however, have failed to keep pace with this explosion of information and the rapid changes in our society from technological advances in media (Luke, 2007). Levitin states that this, coupled with the fact that educational systems at large are not teaching 'what constitutes evidence and how to evaluate it' (2017: XV), has allowed fake news to flourish. McLuhan stated that 'an understanding of media's effects constitutes a civil defense against media fallout' (Playboy, 1994) and the only tangible way of giving people this understanding is by developing media literacy to interrogate, verify and evaluate media and its effects, as well as make use of it intelligently. While basic media literacy is an established modern pedagogy that can cut through the deception of fake news, it alone is not sufficient to change the hierarchies of power within the media landscape nor change society's use of it (Kellner and Share, 2007). It must be recognized that the real issue in reconstructing our relationship with the media is that the environment of partisan news, selective exposure and lack of critical thinking has allowed fake news to become effective in the first place.

Critical media literacy goes further in this regard. Instead of focusing on traditional media analysis of how people communicate through new media platforms, the critical element of the practice explores 'the role of language and communication to define relationships of power and domination' (Kellner and Share, 2007: 60–69). The pedagogy asserts that media literacy needs not only to expand with the new forms of mass communication technology and popular culture, but also to critically analyse the relationships between these media technologies, cultures and the structures of power that play a role in shaping them. Critical media literacy:

> involves cultivating skills in analysing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media. (Kellner and Share, 2007: 4)

Critical media literacy applies Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness, that emerges from a deeper understanding of the modern world, its history and its inherent structures of power. It aims to approach the world objectively and holistically, with the aim of , seeking freedom from the oppression that these structures often project. What is key in both critical consciousness and critical media literacy, from an epistemological sense, is evaluation and judgement formulated by objective analysis. Applying this to media literacy allows consumers to become their own gatekeepers of media, dismissing and consuming it as they see fit based on their own objective evaluation of the ideologies in a medium. It is this individual dissemination that gives an unbiased and empirical view of all media, fake, real or otherwise, that can allow a paradigm shift in the way media is consumed.

There are two main risks to be recognized with the fake news phenomenon that we need to consider. The most obvious one is indeed lies and propaganda that lead to a misinformed and further divided public with no hope of participating meaningfully in democracy, and tangible harm such as the atrocities that befell the Jews of Trent. Perhaps the more pressing threat is the use of fake news as a political justification of media control. We cannot allow

fake news to be an acceptable excuse for the dismissal of truth. While fake news is danger-ous, the real risk is that power uses the existence of fake news to justify an agenda of media control and censorship under the guise of curtailing the phenomenon. This is the hidden threat that is starting to emerge.

Fake news has shattered the trust consumers have in the mainstream media and filled that vacuum with misinformation (Rowe and Alexander, 2017). Indeed, people should maintain a healthy scepticism towards news media, but they must not sour on empirical truth that can be proven or be influenced by the machinations of partisanship. Media literacy and critical media literacy provide the tools to be able to take this approach to journalism. If education takes the forefront in the fight against fake news and people can discern for themselves what is legitimate and what is fake, there will be no need for content gatekeeping. Media literacy allows the media to continue its trend towards accessibility and decentralization, while quality control rests upon the more well-informed individual who can filter through media and understand its ideology, where it comes from, who it is aimed at and what its goal is. Fake news itself is not the real issue; the real issue is that it is often believed.

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