

**INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**



## MEDIA LITERACY AS A RESPONSE TO FAKE NEWS

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### Abstract

*Critical thinking and media literacy programs are essential to increase citizens' resilience to fake news. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the role of media literacy in combating disinformation and propaganda. Also, the article highlights the importance of media literacy in the contemporary world; the characteristics of media literacy and several recommendations and strategies that aim to develop critical thinking of the individuals, especially for the young generation. Although critical thinking and media literacy are long-term solutions, their application will eventually improve and strengthen a democratic society. It is important to learn how to identify and recognize fake news, to know the reasons and mechanisms behind the spread of fake content in the online environment and to understand the necessity of verifying the accuracy of the information before sharing it with others.*

**Keywords:** *critical thinking, media literacy, fake news.*

### Introduction

In the last few years, the fake news phenomenon has seen tremendous public attention especially in the context of the US elections in 2016. Also, in 2017, Collins, an online English Dictionary has proclaimed the term "fake news" the word of the year. In the same way, at a simple search on Google, we will see that the results associated with fake news concept are about 907.000.000. Despite this notoriety, societies are not yet ready to face the new challenges associated with this issue. This happens in the context brought by the development of new technologies and the complexity of algorithms that make it impossible for human beings to detect false messages and disinformation in the online environment.

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A brief historical overview will reveal that starting with the Ancient world and going through the modern times, fake news or disinformation has been a constant throughout all the important and revolutionary moments of the international community. Despite the fact that the phenomenon we are talking about is not new at all, societies have to find tailored solutions adapted to the rapid evolutions of the world. More and more specialists are developing new partnerships in order to create a protective environment for the incoming generation and for the students who are in the early years of school. For example, National Education Association<sup>1</sup> from USA has developed the concept of the four 'C' – Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking and Creativity – skills which could be seen as the premises for 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Also, if we are to consider the increased number of messages that circulates online on social media platforms and the behaviour of people in some cases – like redistributing news without checking it or even reading it – the long term effects will conduct to a chaos of information. In a study<sup>2</sup> from 2017 the authors are talking about concepts like “eco chambers”, “filter bubble”, “confirmation bias”, or, broadly speaking, “information disorder”. In the large spectrum of information disorder, some authors include three types: Dis-information, Mis-information and Mal-information.

In this context, the most frequent question is: What can we do? How can we teach young generations of people to deal with disinformation, propaganda and fake news? Media literacy has become more and more used as a universal response to this very complex phenomenon. As we mentioned before, this type of threat to liberal democracies is not new at all, but will become more sophisticated as the development of artificial intelligence will bring more technological possibilities to multiply and share messages on a larger scale or to create automatic computers to generate and create news. The European Union has adopted an Action Plan against Disinformation in order to

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<sup>1</sup> See more on [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see C. Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan: Information disorder: toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making, Council of Europe report DGI (2017)09, available at <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c>.

fight against disinformation, fake news and propaganda in order to consolidate resilience of the European societies against this kind of hybrid threat. Regarding this, some researchers concluded that “falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories. The effects were most pronounced for false political news than for news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information” (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018). Also, the role of media literacy becomes more important especially in a context in which the development of the fake news phenomenon generates a crisis for contemporary society and threatens the good functioning of liberal democracies.

### **The importance of media literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The technological revolution and the spread of the Internet have reconfigured how we have access to information and redefine the role of the press. In a world where information it is very accessible, the role of selecting it becomes an essential quality for each of us. As we all know, fake news, disinformation or propaganda represent a threat to liberal democracies, and some of the effects regarding this phenomenon include diminishing confidence in state institutions and confusion during electoral cycles. “A community is a healthy democratic community – it is an <<informed community>> – when digital and media literacy are widely taught in schools, public libraries and other community centres” (The Knight Commission 2009). Thus, as a whole, society must provide the premises for an optimal development for young people, especially in terms of education. This becomes even more important as technology influences the teaching and learning process. Students have a lot of information that can be difficult to manage and which they cannot analyse it properly. For this, the role of media literacy becomes crucial in an era of informational abundance. “The traditional way of learning has therefore changed. Learning is no longer seen as an activity restricted to school settings since it went online, and that is why it is now understood (or should be understood) as a process that is disorderly, hazy, informal, chaotic, continuous, digital, lifelong and based on the power of online connections” (Blanco, Nuere, & Martín, 2013, pp. 55-56).

When we refer to media literacy, we are talking about “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication are interdisciplinary by nature” (National Association for Media Literacy and Education, n.d.). The Media Literacy Expert Group of EU defines media literacy as an inclusion of “all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it”<sup>3</sup>. Also, media literacy involves learning to “read” the media through critical analysis, evaluation and reflection. Media literacy involves a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional communication context and the way in which they influence the experiences and actions of people. The citizen who consumes the media adequately, rationally and in an assumed manner should be the new societal model in a world of emerging needs. If young people have analytical skills and they are critically accountable to all media messages, through a real capacity to make decisions, they cannot be manipulated by propaganda or disinformation. All the adult trainers (parents, tutors, teachers, experts, methodologists, etc.) have an important role in developing and expanding the concept of media literacy in order to ensure the premises of an adequate education for young generations. In this sense, it is important for the society to adopt a new formula in order to create literate citizens. For instance, there are some authors who claims that “we must consider new approaches to teaching and learning about media that focus intentionally on the civic: how we can use media to reform communities, to create meaningful human interactions, and to build sustainable pathways for positive social impact” (P.Mihailidis 2018). Also, the importance of media literacy it’s highlighted by Gallagher who considers that “media literacy is important because it is the basis for being an informed and critical

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, see <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/meetings-media-literacy-expert-group>.

thinker in a world where technology and media are ubiquitous, helping to immunize people against undue persuasion and false information” (Gallagher, J.D., Magid, & Ed.D, 2017).

The Media Literacy Group Expert of UE was set up to meet the most pressing issues related to the development and implementation of media literacy process. In this regard, the working group experts “identify, document and extend good practices in the field of media literacy; facilitate networking between different stakeholders, with the aim of cross-fertilization; explore synergies between different EU policies and support programs and media literacy initiatives” (Digital Single Market, n.d.).

More than that, it is necessary to introduce media training programs in schools, especially in secondary education, to promote a lucid and critical attitude among media users regarding media coverage and to promote quality journalism. Also, media literacy is necessary in order to combat misperceptions, prejudices and hate-speech. Before an actual implementation of a media literacy program, one should first establish a conceptual and legislative framework on the basis of which the media literacy program should function. Thus, taking into account the cultural, national and local specificity, the government should establish the best approach to implementing the program together with the civil society and educational institutions. For example, if a community is more likely to watch TV than to read, then media education should use all media channels to convey the message to that community.

At the same time, media literacy is important for democracy and for ensuring a secure information environment. As it has been observed lately, misinformation and distortion of truth around some important events, such as electoral cycles, create confusion among voters and pose a threat to liberal democracy. That is why media literacy plays a role in protecting democracy and democratic processes. Media literacy can also play a role in preventing individuals from adhering to extremist and violent ideologies, and may be a barrier against extremist messages.

The desideratum of media literacy is to create citizens who are responsible for their choices and their opinions. At the same time, media literacy is important to maintain ethical values when creating and disseminating media content across all social media channels. Hence, a literate citizen will have these values and principles, such as sincerity and impartiality.

### **Strategies and techniques related to media literacy and critical thinking**

Young people are more prone to using social media messages, and the educational process should be geared toward inoculating skills for detecting false news and propaganda messages. Preparing them to develop skills related to searching on the Internet and abilities for checking the accuracy of information should begin as early as possible and continue throughout the educational and professional life. The starting point should be developing media and digital competences among young people, introducing media literacy in schools, institutions and organizations, developing cooperation between the private and public sectors.

Also, there are some authors who brings into discussion the role of the teachers in the process of building critical thinking among students: “educators have a responsibility towards their students to foster critical thinking for evaluating information, which in turn informs their decision making. The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood is important in many contexts and at many levels i.e. the personal, group, project, organizational, political, and societal” (Georgiadou, et al. 2018, 3). In the same manner, Hobs argues that “people need the ability to access, analyse and engage in critical thinking about the array of messages they receive and send in order to make informed decisions about the everyday issues they face regarding health, work, politics and leisure” (Hobs 2010, 7).

First of all, media literacy, inevitable, involves critical thinking. Broadly speaking, critical thinking means to constantly analyse and

evaluate the information, making judgments based on facts and proofs. "Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking" (The Foundation for Critical Thinking, n.d.). "Critical thinking consists of an awareness of a set of interrelated critical questions, plus the ability and willingness to ask and answer them at appropriate times" (Browne & Keely, 2007, p. 3).

Developing critical thinking does not only benefit the trained individuals but also the society they are part of. Critical thinking heals a society of prejudice and passivity, making political and social concepts more accessible and making participants more aware and involved.

Teacher training courses are also required so that they have the necessary knowledge to convey to their students. At the same time, teachers and trainers have a role to play in supporting governmental structures in developing specific policy proposals and educational initiatives, especially in media literacy. This leads to increasing citizens' resilience to misinformation and false news as well as to strengthening critical thinking and improving learning through the integration of new technologies into teaching.

As we pointed out throughout this paper, teachers have an important role in developing student critical thinking. Here are some methods and strategies such as:

***Analysing the content of media messages*** – The teachers could start developing lessons in order to improve a student's capacity and skills for questioning media content. Priority should be given to the development of techniques, both technological and theoretical.

***Socratic Method*** – Socrates, a philosopher and professor in ancient Greece, believed that disciplined practice of questions gives the student the opportunity to reason logically and to determine the validity of some ideas. "The oldest, and still the most powerful, teaching tactic for fostering critical thinking is Socratic teaching. In Socratic teaching we focus on giving students questions, not answers." (Paul & Elder, 1997).

Through this technique, the professor claims that the subject is not known for him and begins a discussion with students. In this way, the teacher will analyse the arguments and the knowledge possessed by students. The Socratic Method starts from the idea that each person has

the logical ability to understand and find out any answer. The main advantage of this method is that each student is actively involved in the learning process, which is a personal effort.

**Individual Learning Plans** – Learning plans must be adapted to the age and understanding of the individual, so that the information transmitted can be properly received and understood. Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit international educational and professional development organization, provides information and individual learning plans on the role of media literacy to the general public. Through key questions, citizens can develop certain skills to evaluate the information they encounter: “How does social media shape our relationship to and understanding of breaking news events?” “What is the relationship between social media and the practice of quality journalism?” “How do we know if information shared on social media is credible?” Using these questions as a starting point, students explore a variety of topics, including the impact of media on the population, in terms of confirmation bias and stereotypes, and the impact of social media on mainstream news media and public opinion.

“Many news organizations, including PBS News Hour and the New York Times, have also published lesson plans designed to help students develop the habits of mind necessary to critically evaluate online news content” (Holmes, 2018).

**Game Media Literacy** – This is a concept defined as “educational processes that are specific to games. These processes specifically include learning that takes place while playing games, education that takes place while designing games, learning about games and learning from games how to teach” (Swertz, 2016, p. 1). A game is the simplest way to learn and practice certain skills.

**Reading laterally** – Means consulting, reading and looking for third-party sources to verify the information in terms of precision, truth and credibility.

A study by experts at Stanford University, which tracked how different participants, including academics such as history teachers, fake news experts and students assess the credibility of online sources, found that:

“Historians and students often felt victim to easily manipulated features of websites, such as official-looking logos and domain names. They read vertically, staying within a website to evaluate its reliability. In contrast, fact checkers read laterally, leaving a site after a quick scan and opening up new browser tabs in order to judge the credibility of the original site. Compared to the other groups, fact checkers arrived at more warranted conclusions in a fraction of the time (Wineburg & McGre, 2018, p. 2)”.

The authors explain that those who have been able to best evaluate sources – fact-checking experts – have used what is called *lateral reading*, and they have checked other sources available about the site in question instead of analysing the same site.

Before implementing media literacy strategies and methods, it is important to remember that the role for their effectiveness is shared between communities, school, local, regional, and international authorities. A media literacy strategy must continue throughout the educational process of students and pupils so that they become responsible adults when interacting with social media and online news/messages. For this, it is necessary for them to have developed critical thinking and be aware of the simple error of judgment, to distinguish between facts and opinions, to have a logic based on interpretation and analysis, depending on context and event. At the same time, it is necessary for parents to continue the educational process at home and to provide time for activities related to online content and not only. The authorities, in their turn, have the task of allocating financial resources to implement such strategies: campaigns to raise awareness about fake news and to promote the role of media literacy, introducing school curricula dedicated to this theme or summer school for students.

On the other hand, there are some opinions stating that “is not sufficient to simply raise awareness about how and why certain news is produced and consumed, but it is also necessary that authorities take a more active role in regulating the distribution of that information rather than hoping that millions of people will fast become media-wise” (Celot, 2018).

Wardle and Derakhshan argue that the long-term implications of misinformation campaigns are specifically created to spread distrust

and confusion and to intensify already existing socio-cultural divisions, using nationalistic, ethnic, racial and religious tensions as instruments (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Another critical aspect is that popular social networks make it difficult for people to evaluate the credibility of any message as the content looks almost identical. This means that people increasingly rely on friends and family members to guide them through the informational space.

As Messing and Westwood have argued, “social media has had two effects: by combining stories from multiple sources, the emphasis is on the story, not on the source, secondly, social recommendations and approvals guide readers,” rather than checking and analysing (S.Messing & Westwood, 2014). Social media has had a profound impact on how people are discussing current issues and engaging with politics. The presence on these platforms helps young people to independently cultivate a political identity and provides people of all ages with personalized civic knowledge both in authoritarian and democratic regimes. Large-scale moves were born, organized and broadcasted on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, FireChat and Twitter. Positive and widespread democratic social media potential is widely discussed, but we must be aware that at the same time there could be another dark side of this new technology (Woolley & Howard, 2016).

Social media has become a powerful tool for propaganda because interactive social networking sites provide a powerful platform for debate and sharing of opinions. Propaganda, in the form of a YouTube uploaded video, a post on Facebook or Twitter, or even a comment, has a great deal of efficacy to disseminate certain values and beliefs.

Fake news phenomenon is a global issue, and global scale solutions are therefore needed. Several countries, including France, Germany, Singapore and Malaysia have implemented laws to counter fake information, but these efforts are likely to be unproductive if they are not integrated into a wider perspective. To build a successful strategy capable of rebuilding the truth, an exhaustive approach must be multifaceted and inclusive, and efforts should be synchronized in a perfect understanding of the issue and effective long-term results.

It is important to understand first of all how fake news works and how technology facilitates their spread. Moreover, a valid strategy should address the fake news phenomenon in a differentiated manner, since a singular approach to fake news runs the risk of creating limitations.

Scientific studies<sup>4</sup> demonstrate that exposure to disinformation or conspiracy theories leads to alteration of perception, also affecting the decision-making process. For example, in 2014, the University of Kent conducted such a study, demonstrating that parents exposed to a conspiracy theory about the negative effects of vaccination decided not to vaccinate their children, while parents who were provided complete information, including about the falsity of conspiracy theories, and have accepted vaccination.

Also, the process of thinking and evaluating the sources becomes essential in a world dominated by too much information. As Browne and Keely sustain, “thinking carefully is always an unfinished project, a story looking for an ending that will never arrive. Critical questions provide a stimulus and direction for critical thinking; they move us forward toward a continual, ongoing search for better opinions, decisions, or judgments” (Browne & Keely, 2007, p. 2).

On the other hand, Facione goes further and adds two more characteristics of a critical thinker: “Beyond being able to interpret, analyse, evaluate and infer, strong critical thinkers can do two more things. They can explain what they think and how they arrived at that judgment. And, they can apply their powers of critical thinking to themselves and improve on their previous opinions. These two skills are called “explanation” and “self-regulation” (Facione, 1992, p. 6).

### **Media literacy beyond elementary skills**

The main dimensions of media literacy should go further than skills and competencies as abstract notions. Renee Hobs, an expert on

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see Daniel Jolley et al., *The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions*, PloS, vol. 9, nr.2, 2014.

media literacy, proposes five essential elements of media literacy: access, analyse, create, reflect and act (Hobs, 2011, p. 123). According to her, it is important to know how to use media tools in an adequate manner, by appealing to critical thinking, creativity, collaboratively and, also, “applying social responsibility and ethical principles to our own identity, communication behaviour” (Hobs, 2011, p. 12).

The goal of media literacy is to bring a change in the online behaviour of individuals in terms of reading, analysing and sharing messages, especially in the online environment and on social media platforms. Unfortunately, the Internet has reconfigured how we relate to events and news, most of the time this information being already analysed by others. In this way we are much more influenced by the first article/information we read.

Moreover, psychologists warns us that people will look for that information that already confirms their own predispositions, so that the message they adhere to is the one that validates their own conception of the world and life in general. Cognitive bias is a thinking mechanism, which involves a systematic distortion of judgment/rationality in relation to reality, and which can make an individual have different attitudes to facts of the same nature, that is, to have a paradoxical behaviour, contradictory, inexplicably logical. By learning to recognize a cognitive bias, we can avoid a lot of mistakes, improve our memory, affective reactions, and be in control of our identity and value. Thus, the role of media literacy should be understood in terms of behavioural impact and attitudinal change. The more this education and training will be achieved, i.e. from the youngest age, the better prepared adults will be better prepared for the informational environment of the 21st century.

Although we cannot predict how the concept of information will be reconfigured over 50 or 100 years, it is important to know how to relate to what we read every day. Although so-called *deep fake* and *computational propaganda* are at the beginning of the road and become complex and difficult to detect, the internet user will be better prepared if he or she has a minimum of training and knows how to relate to that news or message.

For this, some features that media literacy has developed are essential, including scepticism and the ability to be aware of our own

cognitive biases. People should have that impetus that determines them to look for other sources to have another approach. At the same time, media literacy also means progress beyond the capacity to analyse social media and beyond value based judgments; media literacy should also mean innovation and involvement. The communities need innovation and solutions to address the information challenges of contemporary society. Individuals need to get more involved in implementing and promoting media literacy anywhere and anytime when they have the opportunity. The role for implementing solution to increase awareness among societies should be divided and shared among all actors and participants in public life. In this context, the citizens themselves can dictate the progress and the changes that are challenged to progress.

Media literacy should promote values such as good governance, social inclusion, diversity and media autonomy. Given the recent events and anti-European discourses, these values are very necessary and must be included in media literacy programs.

At the same time, media literacy should be centered on developing research, methodologies and working tools in action areas such as freedom of expression, anti-discrimination, communication campaigns, and public events that promotes the values of liberal democracy. The role of media literacy, beyond being able to identify disinformation, should go to the development of creativity in media communication.

As we have highlighted above, social media is becoming more and more a primary source of information, especially for young people. They, as well as other citizens, must be able to distinguish between credible and less credible sources of information. Therefore, initiatives aimed at increasing the level of media literacy are essential. Interactive training and workshops for media consumers should be supported and developed to improve information standards.

Finally, the improvement of education systems around the world is based on cooperation and information sharing about the best practices and lessons learned, to stimulate the development of

programs and initiatives to implement media literacy. The young generation can benefit from new educational tools and practices that will provide them with a new understanding and approach to the online environment.

Media literacy should not only be taught in schools, but by all possible audience channels. For example, media literacy on TV or radio programs could be introduced. YouTube special channels or blogs that promote this concept could also be created for young people. It is well known that young people tend to mimic behaviours. Therefore, if celebrities promote the concept of media literacy and popularize it among young people, they would be more open to adopt responsible behaviour when consuming online news.

Thus, the media literate individual is the one who makes informed decisions based on critical thinking, consults high-quality journalistic sources, and promotes media literacy and the credibility of information by verifying the traceability of the information and its authenticity. In the long term, the targeted solutions should refer to media education by interinstitutional collaboration between public authorities, media groups and online platforms.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen throughout this paper, a strong argument can be made that media literacy is more necessary than ever. In fact, due to this type of hybrid threat, there is an increased interest in developing media literacy, especially for the new generations who collect their information from social networks and other resources online and they must learn to decode what they read and share.

Liberal democracies need to be well prepared in the future to defend themselves against fake news, disinformation and computational propaganda that come from the sphere of hybrid warfare. This time, fake news and mass manipulation will be extremely difficult to control.

Regarding the role of the ministries of education, they all must insert media education into curriculum pursued at a range of disciplines, from language, social sciences and humanities areas of communication especially since new technologies have significant

advantages: trainees can search for information that complements the ideas provided by the teacher, they all can collaborate openly with other learners, create and share content.

Considering the fact that it is much simpler and less costly to manipulate population rather than militarily and economically conquer a territory, the new approaches to the process of education are needed. New technologies should also be seen as tools in the educational process to be used in order to develop critical thinking and other skills. The effects of fake news are still a matter of debate, but it cannot be denied that these issues have very direct political consequences, as we have seen in several recent events.

Finally, more than ever, it is necessary to empower citizens and facilitate the acquisition of media skills necessary to access, understand, analyse, evaluate and produce content and to distinguish between real and false news. And this has to be done by betting on the benefits of media literacy, with a civic sense that reinforces democracy by building an informed citizenship that can decide freely. It is everyone's responsibility to fight against the manipulation, propaganda and fake news.

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