

Media Literacy vs Fake News: Workshop Report

1. Workshop Methods

Two days of activities in London at the Olympic Park on 15th and 16th March 2019 brought together four stakeholder groups – teachers, journalists, young people and information / library professions - with a public event consisting of keynote presentations and a panel comprised of the US and UK academics involved in the project – Professor David Buckingham, Professor Monica Bulger, Professor Paul Mihaildis, Dr Karen Fowler-Watt and Dr Roman Gerodimos.

Video recordings of all the presentations and the panel discussion are on the project site.

The workshop was designed to generate dialogue on four issues:

(1) clarifying the problem (the apparent ‘information disorder’) from lived experience of the stakeholders;

(2) identifying any competing or partly integrated discourses around the concept of trust in media and information;

(3) evaluating a range of educational resources already in the world – we called this ‘testing the wheel’;

(4) agreeing on what media education can realistically do, to move beyond ‘solutionism’ (Buckingham, 2019) towards a more viable, modest proposal for Fake News vs Media Studies. Where *do / can* we have agency?

The participants were invited through our networks, so represent a purposive sample, rotating through 3 activities each of 45’ duration in mixed groups: *Testing the Wheel* gathered views on online resources for media literacy that are already available, *Fake news and issues around disinformation* sought to assess why fake news matters and *A Question of Trust* asked, ‘what is trust?’ ‘What is its function in society?’ ‘How can trust be developed and maintained?’ The event concluded with reflections from each group of stakeholders. The theme of trust ran as a red thread through our conversations.

Example: Workshop: A Question of Trust

- *Trust refers to a relationship*
- *Trust is an action (in a process)*
- *Trust needs preconditions*
- *Trust is limited (to a subject, specific matter)*

(Blobaum, 2014)

Working with this definition of trust, the participants in each of the 3 rotations engaged with the following format:

Case study discussion: [The Migrant](#)

This example of the Migrant Caravan¹ – and the BBC’s report deconstructing the various ways in which the story was framed in the winter of 2018 - was used to illustrate how media reporting can encourage us to be distrustful, how ‘fear narratives’ can be propagated and the dangers of stereotype and stigma. These atmospherics lead to a decline in trust and rising scepticism. The case study also provided an illustration of an ‘explainer’, created by a publicly funded news organisation to ‘debunk’ fakery and offered a point of reference to ground the discussion.

The **workshop aims** were threefold:

- to draw up a checklist of factors that contribute to building trust
- to devise an overarching statement on trust and news
- to make an innovative contribution to the toolkit as a group

The participants engaged with these aims through:

- **defining** trust/distrust in relation to news sources – what is a trusted/distrusted source for news?
- asking **why** we trust/distrust these sources?
- questioning **how** we can trust/distrust them?
- engaging in **critical evaluation of news values** in relation to trust in news e.g. impartiality

The workshop concluded with each group devising an **overarching statement on trust** to add to their checklist, for example: “*in order to trust news media we need ...*” OR “*Trust in news means ...*”. These would help the project team in designing the online ‘toolkit’.

2. Workshop Findings

There is an inherent tendency for people to believe things that aren’t true, so can we change human nature? (media educator)

These are reflections on the London activities from Jane Secker, Chair of the CILIP Information Literacy Group:

My group had a lively mix of people and the students had some really interesting perspectives on how they developed an understanding of who to trust online, how to find ‘real’ news and how to behave on social media.

In our first discussion we looked at the phenomenon of fake news or disinformation, which pretty much everyone concluded was a dreadful term, but one that had captured the public’s attention. We considered why it mattered and what we could do about it and what role schools and education played. The journalists in our group were clearly

¹ The migrant caravan that moved through Central America in 2018 was an unofficial gathering of around 7000 people who travelled from 4000km from the Guatemala – Mexico border to the Mexico-US border. Many of them said they were fleeing violence and persecution in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador and their goal was to settle in the US, despite threats that they would face prosecution or deportation. See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-45951782>

concerned that claims of fake news undermine quality journalism and make their work far harder.

In our second discussion we talked about trust and news and how we know who to trust and what we wanted our media to commit to so we knew it was trustworthy. We talked about things like transparency, the need to make facts and opinions very differentiated and a commitment to trying to get to the truth, which meant that journalists needed to build relationships with individuals who are close to the story. They also needed to be clear about their sources.

In our final workshop we looked at existing media literacy resources that are designed to help highlight the issues associated with fake news. My group concluded we needed any new resource to be reliable, engaging and succinct. The journalists were surprised that librarians had such an important role, they hadn't realised that. The students said that anyone clicking on fake news and sharing links readers are part of the problem here. But they felt it was a big responsibility to have to check every website they looked at to make sure it wasn't 'fake'.

What struck me during the day was that uncertainty and starting to question if anything was true was not a helpful situation to be in and also something that could be quite unsettling for students and young people, getting to grips with the world. Fake news and dis or mis-information is a real challenge, and certainly not one that librarians can solve alone, however it was great to find some like-minded and new people to collaborate with on tackling this.

As our field review had indicated, drawing up a checklist of factors that contribute to building trust was going to be challenging – even with an engaged group of key stakeholders, the climate of ‘ennui’ and helplessness permeated our discussions. ‘Where does that leave you?’ asked David Buckingham ‘It’s a really difficult question if you don’t trust anybody or anything.’ One student offered a counterpoint, that *being young means being powerless so there is no choice but to listen and that is a good thing because it’s good to consume diverse opinions on social media.* Trust in the media required validation – whether from media itself or from a personal approach (echo chamber).

Everybody’s looking for a quick answer, but what we’re talking about here is going to take twenty to forty years. We need a new literacy for the twenty-first century and it’s not going to happen tomorrow and nobody around education wants to hear that. And the corporations are not going to change, their business model is to keep people on their platforms.

There are alliances we should be wary of. Recently we were approached by Russia Today for a partnership, involving our students. Is that an alliance we want? If Google funds a project, what’s lying behind that?

The most important alliances in the short term are across the curriculum, media educators working with teachers in Science, Maths, raising media awareness in all subjects, for example there’s plenty of fake news about science.

There’s that old line – in a democracy, you get the politicians you deserve. Well, in the twenty-first century, we get the information we deserve. If we build resilience in our students, make them critical consumers of media and information, not just cynicism but inculcating critical thinking, then the environment will change. Ultimately, if we teach our students to demand better media, it will happen.

There was agreement that the problem is not only about information disorder but also the failure of education to create resilient, critical thinkers – “*we need a conversation about the purpose of education. Why is it necessary to be educated? Different modes of education mean different paradigms and worldviews for students*” and “*What is a school education that is fit for the future? Media literacy is peripheral instead of central, that needs to change.*” There was also a shared view that the lack of a civil, debating culture in state education is part of the problem.

On questions of trust, participants agreed that the ‘blind trust’ in social media was a problem, that genuinely trustworthy media would have “no hidden agenda” but that, in the ‘post-truth’ era, there might be a generational distinction between a broad skepticism (“there’s always an agenda”) and a more trusting engagement - “*You can piece together your own trust, from different perspectives on twitter*”. The dialogue ‘zoomed in’ in two themes – objectivity is an illusion (“*Get the extreme views from both sides and the truth is somewhere in the middle*”) but “*if you don’t trust anybody or anything, then your kind of lost.*” – and an agreement that there is a new danger here, in the shape of ‘the dark art of the algorithm’ and thus, media literacy is about something new, something else, these days – “*The browser that you choose is not a neutral choice.*”

Journalists articulated a different discourse in every group at every workshop, both asserting an insider position and defending the profession:

My relationship is with my sources, refugees in camps in Libya – anything inaccurate can have real world affects. If I get something wrong, then my sources are going to be in a very bad situation. And if one thing that is wrong, somebody can use that to discredit the entire report.

With breaking news, it’s hard to verify things, especially from social media. There is an expectation that the BBC should be first – so the pressure comes from social media.

The difference between articles taking months to verify information compared to those that have taken minutes – there’s a difference and we need to be able to distinguish between the two. And that gets confused on social media.

Theme: Sources of news and trustworthiness

The checklist shaped around sources that have *no hidden agenda*, where stories have *documented sources, quotes*. A range of sources inspired trust, because ‘*You can piece together your own trust from different perspectives on Twitter*’ (media educator); ‘*you can piece together trust from different sources*’ (student). One student saw social media as a trustworthy source, but another disagreed saying that ‘*people only trust it more because they use it more*’ and ‘*social media sensationalises*’ (media educator); ‘*social media keeps everyone in their own echo chamber*’ (media educator). There was more of a consensus around trust being based on personal relationships – the participants were inclined to trust a news source that was recommended by a close friend or relative: Likewise, journalists who they ‘knew’ were more likely to be trusted, even if their views differed: ‘*when I know where that person is coming from, I can engage with it*’ (media educator); ‘*I think less about the organisation and more about who is doing the writing*’, (media educator). They were also more likely to trust individuals who were ‘*verifiable as a primary source*’ (student). However, one student sought to avoid reading the tabloids, that his parents read, ‘*because I know they are trying to influence my belief*’. A librarian said *I don’t think I trust anything*’. She would form her own opinion from looking at all

angles, but *'I would only do that for something I was interested in'* and felt that she was more sceptical now than ever before. Another librarian reads *'extreme views from both sides and the truth is somewhere in the middle'*. Confirmation - bias was generally acknowledged: One student goes with his own instincts and beliefs, a media educator noted that *'I normally read things that align with my opinions'* and, consequently, avoids TV news. Another media educator agreed, noting that he tries to *'maintain a critical faculty. Something that I need to do perhaps more than 10 years' ago'*. The journalists in the groups, the producers of news underlined the importance of trust between journalist and source(s), a freelance journalist emphasised the imperative of going to the primary source, as *'people will re-write other people's reports and not correctly source. So, find the original and cross-verify'*. One journalist highlighted the importance of *transparency* and acknowledging mistakes to build a relationship of trust between news producers and news consumers. But that can lead to *'over validation and over-emphasising – like a pushy teacher at the beginning of class!'* (student). Another journalist felt that *'I want to know how they [the news organisation] got to that point'*.

Trust in media is highly personal, this may be partially because verification – or *'finding the kernel of truth'* as one librarian described the fact-checking process - is hard work. This sense was clearly evident in all 3 iterations of the trust workshop, and – as a result - individuals are generally inclined to engage in careful source and fact-checking on an *ad hoc* basis, since *'no one really has the time to check multiple sources'* (media educator). Ultimately even cross-checking leads to an assessment based on personal opinion *'and whether you believe it yourself'* (media educator).

Theme: media literacy education

Media education was critiqued by some participants for failing to prepare students adequately for the disruptive age, *'for the realities that [they] are going to face'* (librarian). There was general agreement on this point and some of the students felt that teaching was constrained by the curriculum, with the scope for critical debate being limited as a result: *'No, we aren't discussing that, it's not for the exam'* (student). This was seen as an obstacle to building a wider understanding of news sources in relation to trustworthiness and a constraint on developing critical thinking. One media educator felt that the quality of her own teaching was constrained by questions around the veracity of news sources stemming from an abundance of poor journalism *'I cannot stand up in front of my class and say, 'it's quality journalism''*.

Question: Does impartiality help or hinder building trust?

A brief critical evaluation of news values, notably impartiality and whether these can bolster trustworthy journalism elicited mixed views. Journalists largely took an organisational view: *understanding ownership helps us understand news values* (e.g. RT, Fox). Impartiality means different things to different people: *'Every news source I go to has a bias or agenda. Cross-referencing is crucial to get different viewpoints'* (media educator); *'They can have their own biases as long as what they have reported is factual'* (student); *'if we have a concern with objectivity, then I choose a balanced mix of views rather than, just [for example] The Guardian'* (librarian).

Focus: Building a checklist.

A drive to engage with a *multiplicity of sources* in order to trust news, *transparency* and *accountability* from news organisations and journalists, individual, *personalised* approaches to *verification* and a frustration with the current provision and focus of *media education* that fails to prioritise *critical thinking* characterised the checklist that shaped the final over-arching statements produced by each group, forming a set of recommendations.

3. Workshop Recommendations

(3a): ‘In order to trust news media, we need...’

- Education that looks for the fuller picture as a creator as well as an observer. You need to first trust yourself and equip yourself to get as close to the truth as possible (i.e. develop critical awareness). (Rotation 3)
- Access to multiple sources. Transparency so that we know where the information is coming from and who owns it. To be our own verifiers, we need critical thinking and self-reflexivity to be informed by a wider range of sources. (Rotation 1)
- Transparency and critical education in tandem. It is a matter of balance and a dual responsibility’ (Rotation 2)

(3b): The workshop identified a ‘top ten’ of media literacy resources for dealing with information disorder. These include more holistic, critical media literacy activities (Teaching to Fish) - a more effective and sustainable approach than ‘giving a fish’ through fact-checking tools or surface level media / information literacy competences.

(3c): The data generated from the field review, interviews and workshops, taken together, lead us to the following three recommendations:

(1) Rather than producing competence frameworks for media literacy, as though it is a neutral set of skills for citizens, media education needs to enable students to apply the *critical* legacies of both Media Studies and literacy education on the contemporary media ecosystem;

(2) Media education must adopt *a dynamic* approach to media literacy and increase the experiential, reflexive aspects of media *practice* in the curriculum, with reciprocal transfer between the critical rhetorics above and creative media practice in order to respond, academically, to media as primarily a question of representation. In other words, resilience *to* representation is enhanced by expertise *in* representing.

(3) We need to add the critical exploration of social media, algorithms and big data to the media education curriculum, accompanied by applied practical learning in the *uses* of them for social justice, as opposed to training the next generation in the use of these for even further commercial and political exploitation of one another.