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Teaching Journalism in the Era of Social Networks

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Abstract: This stream seeks to explore the ongoing transformation of journalism education under digitalization in the complex context of the rise of social media, the spread of unverifiable and misleading information in today's context, and the changing roles of journalists, educators, and audiences in the liquid reality surrounding us. We will discuss how journalism education and media literacy programs are developing, enabling people to fully use the benefits of the online realm: civic engagement, communication and interaction in online spaces, self-representation, the use of digital services and much more. We will also discuss how effective the usage of social media and e-learning are as educational tools for journalism studies (including digital journalism), looking at best practices and challenges from different national and cultural contexts around the world.

The growing power of digital platforms, increasing popularity of social networking sites and the development of digital journalism as a new academic field with its theories, research methods, normative underpinnings and possible futures for academia as well as for professional journalistic community (Steensen and Westlund, 2021), intensified recently an important problem of the spread of misleading, unverifiable information in digitalized world. This problem has truly global nature: large amount of worldwide academic attention has been given in this vein to conceptual understanding of what unverifiable information is, how it is used, and why it is used (Waisbord, 2018), and to building a distinct typology of this type of information in academic context (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018).

Regardless of overall growing importance of unverifiable information in the digital media space today, there is little understanding of how journalistic work in different countries is being affected by the spread of this type of information, and how journalists working in these specific national and cultural contexts can contribute to combatting misleading information in their professional daily practice. It is overall clear that the continuing spread of unverifiable news has brought new challenges for journalists, questioning their degree of responsibility and accountability for fighting misleading information. Recent study by Saldaña and Vu (2021) showed that journalists care about unverifiable information and about the effects this type of information might have on journalism, news organizations, society and audiences. Despite a low level of confronting and reporting unverifiable information among the reporters they revealed, the study identified factors that significantly increase the likelihood of journalists debunking misleading information: journalists' 'sense of reciprocity toward social media audiences, as well as their opinion of the role social media companies play in the news ecosystem, are two important factors'. An important area here is the study of fact checkers (Humprecht, 2020) and how those contribute to combatting unverifiable information in online space. In some countries, including Russia, an additional challenge can be the remaining digital inequalities in access to Internet and ICTs, as well as in ICT skills of journalists and their digital and media literacy that can negatively impact journalists' ability to identify and fight misleading information.

Another important factor defining unverifiable information is the role of the audience. While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that it is co-constructed by the audience (Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2018). Tandoc et al (2018) explored the ways people authenticate information they consume via social media, relying to a large extent on their own sense of judgment, and also taking into account the characteristics of the message itself and of the source. Audience's engagement with the news and a growing need to distinguish between verifiable information and misleading one contributed to academic discussion about media and news literacy of both audience and journalistic community. Tully (2021) showed that although participants were not particularly familiar with the concept of media literacy, some engaged in news literacy behaviors, such as verifying stories found on social media, fact-checking, and looking for more reliable sources when confronted with news and information they perceived as unreliable but only under certain circumstances.

In this context, the relatively new term of media and information literacy (MIL) should be noted. An umbrella concept championed by UNESCO, MIL incorporates a range of literacies, including news literacy, to create a new literacy construct "to empower people, communities and nations to

participate in, and contribute to, global knowledge societies” (UNESCO, 2021). UNESCO’s vision of MIL has a strong emphasis on equality – in this instance, between global communities, in terms of the media they can access and the tools they have to understand it.

An important role of news literacy was recently underlined by Morris and Yeoman (2021) by closely looking at how journalism educators perceive and interpret news literacy. They argued that more professional development seminars to teachers covering news literacy concepts, or workshops on news literacy concepts such as verification and misinformation are needed today. This is in line with recent suggestions by scholars to focus more closely on the computational approaches to unverifiable information, in general, and on creating successful automated filters of this type of information, such as finding the markers for misleading information (predictors, features, proxies etc.) and making them work in practical news filtering (Bodrunova, & Gladkova, forthcoming).

In this context, we feel there is a clear need for straightforward and consistent educational programs aimed at increasing local journalists’ digital competences and critical thinking, much relevant for identifying and combatting unverifiable information in both offline and online/digital realms. This task gets specifically important given a key role that belongs to media education and digital literacy programs, enabling people to construct and further increase their digital capital level and fully use the benefits of online realm: civic engagement, communication and interaction in online space, self-representation and self-actualization, the use of digital services and much more. This close connection between digital capital and users’ literacy was earlier examined by Morgan (2010) in his study of education classroom and students’ digital literacy skills. Furthermore, Frau-Meigs showed in her works (2012) that in the cyberist era, characterized by the primacy of online exchanges over offline exchanges, the rise of user-aggregated contents and an increase in strategies between broadcast media and broadband media, literate activities are more complicated and so are the relevant competences expected of users and learners.

In this panel discussion, we suggest focusing more on how journalism education can meet the new requirements, demands and challenges posed by the changing reality around us. We encourage a discussion around relevant journalism education case studies from various regions of the world, problems faced by journalism educators and students (technological, economic, cultural and others) in liquid, rapidly changing and uncertain reality around us, as well as solutions and recommendations by experts in journalism education, scholars and policy-makers.

Placing our discussion in a broader context, we can note that the active development of new/non-institutionalized media in the modern digital environment, the rise of multimedia and cross-platform communication and interaction have led to the emergence of new effects on the audience, intensity, degree of influence on specific audience groups/specific users, as well as the dynamics and duration of which have not been thoroughly studied in academia yet. The important role of both institutionalized/traditional media, as well as new media, including social media and activities of the so-called ‘new professionals’ and bloggers, which have become widespread in the modern digital environment are typical for all national and cultural contexts today. This brings us in a way to a question of how journalism education in different regions of the world has been recently developing and changing under these new trends, challenges and prospects, how – and if – professional journalistic ethics has transformed, and what new competencies and skills are required for journalistic work today, also given recent challenges brought up by the pandemic (Vartanova, & Lukina, 2022).

At this panel meeting, we suggest focusing on two key dimensions of journalism education: professional journalistic training/journalism education encompassing both BA/MA/PhD degree programs at journalism institutes/universities/schools and retraining programs on the one hand, and the field of media education and media literacy aimed at broader diversified audience that includes different age, professional, cultural and social groups on the other hand. Approaching these two dimensions as closely related parts of broader journalism/media education concepts, we encourage a discussion about an important role of media literacy, adding up to critical thinking of people and to a significant extent forming it. We argue that the lack of media and information literacy can lead to false or one-sided interpretations of the events, the spread of fake news and even manipulation of the public opinion, which gets particularly important in case of young Internet users. Our panel therefore aims at raising questions about new challenges for journalism and media education in different national and cultural contexts, new professional demands for journalists including well-developed ICT skills, high level of digital capital, ability to identify, check and combat false information, and prospects for developing media literacy programs as part of journalism education or as standalone ones in different regions of the world.

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