

Journalism Education in the Age of Misinformation

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Stream meeting summary by rapporteur Sonia Virgínia Moreira, Professor, State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; expert/background report by Alex Wake, Associate Professor, RMIT University, Australia (see wjec.net/2022-online-conference/ at conference streams tab); panel chair Nico Drok, Professor, Windesheim UAP, Belgium, and additional team members (below).

This stream included participants from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United States. This global gathering naturally allowed the exchange of ideas, experiences, and approaches on what can be identified currently as a “culture” of misinformation, leading to ways of educating on misinformation in graduate and undergraduate courses in different countries. Secondary education was also considered as a locus for education on misinformation and for developing projects on media/digital literacy.

Verification, double-checking before publication, credibility checking, and the use of fact-checking programs are keys to fight misinformation. Participants agreed on the importance of verification considering multiple perspectives, making it possible for students to develop specific skills in the processes of fact-checking.

Main topics of discussion

Being able to spot misinformation is a necessary skill for students because it is impossible to control the use of fake news. Society has taken over the discussion on this subject and journalism schools need to consider this. Fact-checking is a subdiscipline that has only recently been embraced as part of journalistic practice. The rise of fact-checking can be best understood as a response to an authority crisis with vast quantities of information available on the Internet, especially user-generated content, which bypass the traditional role of journalists and of the legacy media as gatekeepers of information.

There is a shared notion of the importance of verification and the usefulness of fact-checking programs in the current situation of a “war on truth.” This demands discussions on what comes next in addition to verification. In that regard some questions were raised, including:

- Do we want to train or educate super journalists that are able to fact-check or claim-check using special techniques or to make students able to critically examine the complete media landscape?
- How can students understand and report the system behind the information?
- Should journalism students learn to strengthen their audiences’ media literacy capacities to empower them and make them less vulnerable to misinformation?
- Can we do more than we are doing now – and, in this case, what would that entail?

To deal with these questions, journalism educators should consider that present times demand a humbler role for journalism since students must now work in collaboration

with others to get at the truth. They should be aware of the different roles played by those who are not journalists but are fighting misinformation since today's digital access to information is extremely widespread. Journalism educators should stress this reality.

Since students are also media consumers, it is essential they are media savvy and to reinforce the use of data journalism among students because reliability comes from credibility. Regarding courses, it is important to reaffirm that double-checking is part of everyday discussions. Fact-checking, from a journalism education perspective, is not just about identifying a problem and organizing a course to overcome it. Courses and techniques should enable more critical journalists, capable of reacting faster to false information. Students should learn to be critical thinkers, with a strong ethical foundation, first. Fact-checking comes second. Ethical and structural levels are essential for students to understand the role of journalism in societies. Finally, journalism educators should be mindful that what we think journalism education should be and what it seems to be is an ongoing problem in the context of the field.

Recommendations

1. Consider the broader system of education, the existing conditions for news production and for journalism education, because the media landscape and markets always influence any given context.
2. Emphasize critical thinking in all journalism programs, with students at all levels in their education, and particularly in universities.
3. Reinforce credibility as the basis of journalism. Credibility is central to the profession since it comes from efforts to earn trust.
4. Teach students to use global and national open access databases to verify information.
5. Organize teams of students from different countries to work together, which will add value to programs. In doing so, they can learn how to cooperate and one another's different approaches and cultures, especially approaches toward journalism, facts, and fact-checking.

Conclusion

Journalism courses need to examine the impact of fake news on audiences and encourage students to think about them. Working on this issue will make students reflect and help them understand that audiences are not the problem, the nature of the claims are.

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