

THE ERA OF FAKE NEWS: DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A PROMOTION OF CRITICAL READING

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Abstract

This paper considers the early stage results of the Media In Action project, particularly related with these two questions: What reflections arise when we consider digital storytelling in the context of the news processes in the training of teachers who work with children and young people? What are the most appropriate processes for such training, not only in how to apply the training but also in its contents? Initial results indicate a huge interest on techniques and theoretical frameworks on digital storytelling and the parallel need to better understand the information and news contexts in this digitalized society. At the same time, it was found that they are quite interested in collaborative practices and knowledge exchange among peers.

Keywords: digital storytelling, critical reading, new teaching environments, participative methodologies.

1 INTRODUCTION

The "post-truth era" is a threat to democracy, especially when we are facing intensive digital changes. The factors that contribute to this problem are multiple, such as the production and consumption of "false news" that comes from the speed of transmission, the lack of literacy of the news consumers, but also, among others, the absence of practical truthfulness by information professionals. Although the dissemination of misinformation is not a new phenomenon in the history of communication, digital technologies and their speed tend to popularize so-called "fake news", making this a particularly disturbing moment. The current context of digital instantaneity, the low levels of media literacy and literacy for the news of the users contribute to its propagation.

There are several definitions for false news whose fundamentals are the incorporation of elements deliberately spread false content ([1], [2], [3], [4]) and spread it online. Bakir and McStay [1] define false news as containing false or deliberately misleading elements. From the perspective of Berkowitz and Schwartz [2], the false news blur fiction and non-fiction. Vousoughi, Roy and Aral [5] consider that the "new social technologies, which facilitate the rapid sharing of information and large-scale information cascades, can enable the spread of misinformation". Referring to the so-called "click bait" Tandoc, Lim and Ling [6] underline the financial and ideological issues that are underlying the spread of false information:

"Two main motivations underlie the production of fake news: financial and ideological. On one hand, outrageous and fake stories that go viral – precisely because they are outrageous – provide content producers with clicks that are convertible to advertising revenue. On the other hand, other fake news providers produce fake news to promote particular ideas or people that they favor, often by discrediting others"

In an era of loose ends, the concepts are not yet stabilized. Wardle and Derakhshan [4] refer to "information disorder" as a framework for the "false news", whereas the discourse on these combines three notions: "Dis-information" - produced false information deliberately with the intention of harming a person, a social group, organisation or country; "Mis-information" - information that is false but was not created with the intent to harm; "Mal-information" - information from the private sphere that is shared in the public sphere to cause harm [3]. In this line of thinking, the authors identify three stages of the process of "information disorder": creation of the message; production – the information is transformed into a media product; distribution – the content is distributed or made public [3]. In this regard, Bakir and McStay [1] underline

"fake news situation is socially and democratically problematic on three fronts: (1) its production of wrongly informed citizens, that (2) are likely to stay wrongly informed in echo chambers and

(3) be emotionally antagonised or outraged given the affective and provocative nature of much fake news."

Keywords such as mobility, interaction, convergence, multimedia, multichannel, intersection and set the current panorama of cross media. The definition of transmedia, in the context of digital storytelling, summarizes the idea of convergence in contemporary media systems ([7], [8]), influencing directly the public. The concept of transmedia incorporates extensive definitions and focused on technological determinism, as "cross-media", "cross-platform", "transmedia narrative" and "hybrid media" ([9], [10], [7]). It is a singular media ecosystem, hybrid and complex, where audiences cohabit with the media through technological infrastructures that provide social environments. It is in this context that is anchored to the false news.

The consumption of decontextualized and disaggregated information mediated by digital technologies increased exponentially [11]. Users consume information on social media platforms whose algorithms create a bubble of content where relevance is not matched to reality [1]. In the timelines and the streaming of content indexed semantically, the information circulates disaggregated and, therefore, decontextualized [11]. The various layers of information that digital and its multiple social platforms enable "echo chambers" of stories that people want to hear and induce action.

In this respect it is relevant considering the instrumentalization of hearings: "users are often the filter but also the amplifiers of the media professionals and organizations from different sectors" [11]. In this regard, Amaral [11] note that

"In the context of user-generated content, social media have assumed a key role in world events of recent years as reflect, serve as a source of near-real-time information, strengthen civic participation, facilitating the exchange of communication between ordinary users, enable you to expand the weak links of social networking, encourage the creation of thematic self-organizing systems, and support relationships and symmetric and asymmetric networks".

The audiences are less and less passive. Wardle and Derakhshan [4] indicate that "audiences are very rarely passive recipients of information. An 'audience' is made up of many individuals, each of which interprets information according to his or her own socio-cultural status, political positions and personal experiences". As Rose [12] refers, "there are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions. All these arguments make clear the necessity of understanding what social relations produce, and are reproduced by, what forms of visibility". The digital storytelling expands content on multiple platforms and, abandoning the traditional linear approaches, can potentiate a hybridization of languages that can withstand an interactive learning process focused on the development of critical literacies.

This transformation and unstable environment also imply measures with a new character. The "alternative narratives" can be combated with an eye on media education to address critically the complexity of the current media ecosystem in several dimensions: social, economic, political and technological. With interdisciplinary implications that valuable truthful information [13], in this context that we've mentioned, can be the added value of thinking the learning processes about media and journalism, in particular in schools, the place *par excellence* where children and young people spend more time and root the biggest learning possibilities? How can these experiences cross with digital storytelling in the journalistic root and be used in youth and scholar context?

These are areas that are not covered in specific curricula, which makes it harder to motivate teachers to address media education [14] and issues related to technology. Furthermore, how to incorporate these thematic areas on programs already extensive adding extra work to teachers? The most obvious is to consider an adaptation of contents to their existent curriculum planning, in order to meet the educational needs of their students [14], or bridging any existent gaps, taking into account that the technological separation among teachers is high and needs attention [15]. On the 10 critical recommendations that Hobbs [16] identified in educational context and digital media education, the implementation of media education in schools is one of them. In this sense, we also consider of great relevance the interaction between schools and journalists, making a good partnership ([17], [18], [19], [15]).

Linking us with the collaborative and participatory processes as an active form of engagement and learning, we consider very pertinent the approach of Hobbs and Coiro [20]. Point to a "magic collaboration", indicating the importance of the collaborative learning process between educators, librarians and media professionals with regard to uses, creative and critical processes about the digital and the media, making double processes of theoretical learning but also by the practice [20]. Hobbs

and Coiro [20] consider that this process is fundamental in adult education, especially when they have the opportunity to interact and collaborate with your colleagues and peers. When we share and learn from each other, there is a deeper learning process. Collaboration between individuals reinforces possibilities of questioning [20].

2 METHODOLOGY

The media and informational contexts are *per se* a critical environment and must be taken into account in the way citizens position and protect themselves against fake news. “Alternative narratives” can be fought through a focus on media education that critically addresses the complexity of the current media ecosystem in several dimensions: socio-cultural, economic, political and technological. In this article we present a theoretical and critical basis from which we implement a training action for educators in the framework of a European project (Media In Action - LC00632803).

What reflections arise when we consider digital storytelling in the context of the news processes in the training of teachers who work with children and young people? What are the most appropriate processes for such training, not only in how to apply the training but also in its contents? We developed a theoretical proposal that incorporates digital storytelling in the training of educators [21], by integrating different learning mechanisms and with the aim of empowering producers and consumers in constant connection.

In Portugal - our focus in this paper - two training actions (Porto and Coimbra) had been already carried out on "Education for the media and citizenship: how to promote the use of digital in school" subject with teachers of primary, secondary, vocational schools, as well as, librarian teachers. In training, we focused on the research model of participatory action research and in the scope of Communication for Development (C4D). We rely the analysis on the participatory observation of the training, and also on one initial and a final semi-open questionnaires. We can highlight that only half of the respondents say to work with media education in their classes prior to the training and the number increased to 71,4% in the second questionnaire (35 respondents).

Sample characterization (considering the 38 answers to the first questionnaire):

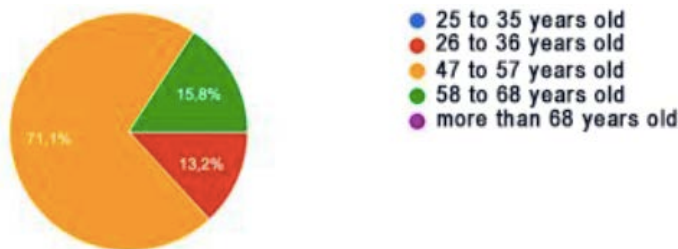


Figure 1. Teachers age.

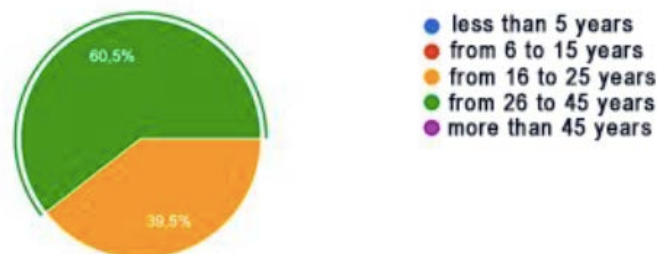


Figure 2. Years that worked as an educator.

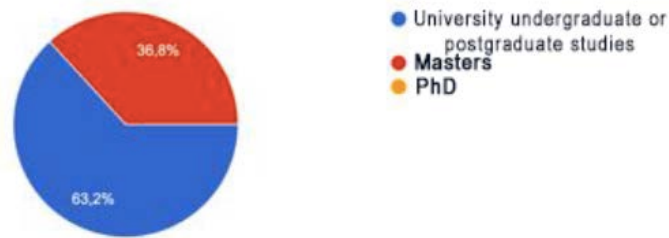


Figure 3. Education level of the teacher.

We have sought to promote a more equitable research, with interactive sharing of knowledge between researchers and trainees [22]. It was crucial that, despite prior preparation to ensure context and training, there was room for participants to define their individual and collective identities and desires in training [22]. Given that the work of schools can be essential in promoting a critical reading of the world [23], the used of journalistic tools is fundamental [24] and to consider the digital storytelling as a promoter of critical thought [25].

3 RESULTS

The training sessions were focused on three main subject areas: media literacy, digital literacy / digital storytelling and also information environments and critical literacies. One of the first results, and to give a brief look into the five countries, is strongly related with the fact that the training was identified as something innovative and as an effective need to be considered in all 5 countries: Wales, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. In fact, although we had a common framework to work with, we made adaptations to the specific needs and rules of the teachers training in each one of the countries. This implied a very specific way of doing the training in Portugal and in Spain and Italy and a broader and freely form of doing it in Wales and Malta.

Early results, specially from Portugal, point to the need to work with dynamic and participative methodologies and also to cross digital storytelling and critical process with the tools most linked to journalism in order to promote a critical reading from the media ecosystem. Educators increased their level of confidence in applying media literacy projects and emphasized, in the first projects they have implemented, the need to increase the learning processes in articulation with critical thinking, digital tools and citizenship. One of the most relevant moment of the training was the session where they had the chance to present their works conducted in the school in behalf of the training, they were very pleased in exchange their common knowledge and get aware of the many different possibilities of work in school contexts. Teachers considered that in a digital environment is always difficult to respond to aspects of information credibility (participant observation field notes, training sessions). This is actually one of the aspects that make this type of training of great relevance, not only because of the digital and technical aspects but also because of the information implications.

In this preliminary analysis we consider mainly the core questions of the paper: What reflections arise when we consider digital storytelling in the training of teachers who work with children and young people? What are the most appropriate processes for such training, not only in how to apply the training but also in its contents? Both on Porto and Coimbra training sessions revealed the huge interest on techniques and theoretical frameworks on digital storytelling and the parallel need to better understand the information and news contexts in this digitalized society. We would also consider, specially from the work the teachers did in the context of the school, implementing what they have learn with the training, that is fundamental that they include theses new practices in the workflow they plane for the school year. There was no room for opting for other possible forms of doing it, because they are always facing constant changes in the educative process and rules and they have both bureaucratic work and extensive programs to deliver.

When they were asked in the first questionnaire about how they see the use of storytelling, almost 30% of them responded that this is a good techniques to persuade the students (since they like digital environments) and almost 45% said that they would like to use these techniques in classroom and indicated (52,6%) that they use Facebook as primary social network to interact with the students.

In the last questionnaire, when responding to how they will integrate media literacy in their school activities, they answered:

"I'm going to use some apps, mainly in Portuguese support study classes, in which the number of students is more reduced, allowing the access of all students to the school computers/tablets and give me the possibility of give a better support to the students during the activities." (Teacher 5, 2nd questionnaire)

"I've been implementing, doing by myself, a Padlet and a Google Maps with the itinerary that tells the story. Besides that, I have several students doing maps with itineraries." (Teacher 11, 2nd questionnaire)

"Sharing with other teachers what I've learned; introducing the Storytelling in Portuguese Classes (on the non-literary text context)." (Teacher 13, 2nd questionnaire)

"Has I've already mentioned before, now I own a whole package of resources that I have to explore and apply in my work context. The focus on Media Literacy is recent on the school librarians and there is a lot of work to do and a group of resources that have been presented." (Teacher 35, 2nd questionnaire)

4 CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary analysis indicates that media literacy and digital literacy training in relation with questions of information is very relevant for teachers and that these implicit new techniques and methodologies that they have learned and can implement with children and young people might be significant means to improve knowledge and interests in different classes. Teachers also considered that these areas are very significant to better understand and separate good and bad information in the vast information environmental contexts. The trainees also revealed a great satisfaction with peer learning processes and some of them even started to deliver some training on media literacy in their working contexts with their peers.

By facing these issues and pointing these solutions, through this approach, it is possible to improve the media literacy levels of young kids and teachers, to take the opportunity to innovate pedagogically in school contexts and curricula approaches as well as working on participative and responsible citizenship of the new generations.

At a time when it is imperative to adapt to a new reality, increasingly immersed in digital, it is essential to follow the emergence of new paradigms given that access does not mean critical analytical capacity. Teaching students to think critically about media implies providing tools to analyse the media ecosystem. Therefore, the use of digital storytelling tools in a school context allows us to work with students to critically question the hybrid ecosystem of the media in which they are immersed and to develop critical thinking around issues related to the consumption of information that is decontextualized and disaggregated into different streaming. It follows that the use of digital storytelling tools to promote critical reading can enhance citizen empowerment and civic competencies to deal with the fake news environment.

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