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Digital Literacy in the Brave New E-Sphere: How To Survive in An Ocean of False Information?

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Introduction & Purpose

One of the messages of Huxley's Brave New World is the alarm against the dangers of technology and the control of society through the manipulation of information. The social circulation of false information is not recent; it's part of the history of the media. Despite the mission of journalism to seek and report the truth, false information already proliferated before the social media. However, the social media give a new impulse to false information, attracting and influencing public opinion. Notwithstanding the noble social functions of journalism in informing, clarifying, and socializing, McLuhan warned of the opposite effects in "Culture Without Literacy" (1953). Warning about situations of falsehood, omission, lies or manipulation that now proliferate in the e-sphere, a new networked virtual public sphere (where we immerse ourselves online in connectivity and interactivity with immanence and immediacy), McLuhan called for the care in interpreting media messages. This is an escalated and reconfigured problem with the Internet. According to Baudrillard in Simulacra and Simulation, we are in a universe in which there is more and more information and less and less meaning. The care in interpreting mass media and social media messages is emerging, imposing the need for a new literacy and citizenship in this new digital public sphere.

The objectives are to understand the repercussions of this new dimension of communication in the digital age and to recognize fake news and disinformation in the digital environment as obstacles to the modern public sphere and to media literacy, in order to survive in our new ocean of false information.

Study Design / Methodology

By questioning the contribution of journalistic literacy in the new virtual configuration of the public sphere, we will be better able to discern what is true from what is false. As fake news is not easy to identify, media and digital literacy is basic knowledge about the new technological nature of media and how they work. Following a theoretical and conceptual approach based on the example of the journalistic model of fact-checking, this new imposition is discussed as a practice of promoting literacy, citizenship, and democracy in the e-sphere.

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Findings

Media literacy promotes critical thinking skills with which citizens can independently and conscientiously choose content, i.e. choose the program, the media or the way to interpret the information received. Media literacy is more difficult when the messages are ideological, rhetorical or with implicit content. In these cases, it is imperative to identify: the significant facts/events in the news; the causes of events and journalistic criteria; the connections between events and agents and their consequences; the information included and omitted; the choices of words and images (denotative or connotative) presented or shared; the order of narration of the facts; the presentation of direct speech or points of view.

With media and digital literacy, it is possible for citizens recognize whether (and how) the media are used to (dis)encourage debate based on false, distorted, or hidden information. Media and digital literacies are as one and are an important democratic instrument in the public sphere, especially in this digital age of online.

Media literacy and digital literacy are a continuum and not fixed categories. Literacies are multidimensional: cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and morals. Information speed factor (immediacy and ephemerality) is one of the main features of new digital media and their uses and consumptions without time to reflect. Digital media technology implies "digital literacy". The technology digital and "digital literacy" are interrelated.

Globalization implies both technological transformations (means and devices of communication and information) and social and cultural transformations (mediated, digital interactions). Each medium has its own characteristics and effects (i.e. its literacy requirements). The brave new world of Huxley is now a new e-sphere, a "retribalized" world-society under the influence of the media and social networks. This is where the consumption of information is more susceptible to illiteracy and fake news (like a cause-effect relationship). Considering the Portuguese have, on average, accounts created on six social networks and about 70% of the population uses social networks, and mostly via mobile phone, there is an increasing indistinction between the truth and the lie (the real and the unreal) transmitted by the media. There is not just one type of literacy, there are many depending on the case.

Originality / Value

The new technological means of communication means new and original ways of thinking about them and their multiple uses and effects. The same happens to the concept of literacy; it changes, becomes more comprehensive and becomes a practical and necessary capacity to participate in the public sphere, which is also a new and digital one. The originality and value

of scientific research about these themes/problems is demonstrated by the new journalistic projects of fact-checking, whose objective is to ascertain the truth of the messages that circulate in the public sphere. It is no longer enough the journalists to produce news; it is necessary to verify facts and separate them from false information. It is necessary to think and rethink the mechanisms and means of information production, namely those of the digital dimension, which allow a faster circulation and propagation of information and its consequences.

Research Limitations

The main limitation concerns to the practical case studied and known in this investigation, which is just one existing case of fact checking in the Portuguese media the “Polígrafo” (Polygraph).

Practical and/or Social Implications

Literacy is a practical skill; it is applicable to everyday life by any citizen in the public space. Thus, having tools to inquire about the information that circulates in the e-sphere and, mainly, in social networks, has immediate consequences and implications in the protection against misinformation or false information that contaminate public opinion. False information grows more and more and social networks abound, where most people are online and digital. The phenomena of the increasing use of mobile technological devices (such as cell phones or smartphones) and the use of social networks are closely associated with the increasing frequency of misinformation and false information. Therefore, it is necessary to acquire skills and practical skills to be preventive and react to this overwhelming phenomenon of information manipulation in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords

Digital literacy, e-sphere, false information, new media, technology.

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