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Media and information literacies as a response to misinformation and populism

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At the time of this writing, we are in a renewed and intensified period of disinformation fuelled in part by the political landscape (which saw an uptick in confusion and maliciousness during the 2016 US presidential election), a global pandemic of unknown origins (COVID-19), a crisis of racial injustice after the death of George Floyd and others at the hands of police, and unprecedented access to information, particularly online information. However, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are not new phenomena, nor are information and media literacies. Indeed, as populism directs our attention to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, information and media literacies have long been concerned with bridging the divide between the ‘haves and have nots’ in regard to information access and use. In this way, it is quite appropriate to view these literacies as a way to combat misinformation and disinformation. There are similarities and differences between information, media, and other literacies; however, they all have great pertinence and utility in the fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

The problem: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

The concepts of misinformation and disinformation are increasingly discussed in the field of information science and many other disciplines and can be thought of as two sides of the same coin. Misinformation is simply defined as information that is incomplete (Fox 1983; Losee 1997; Zhou & Zhang 2007), but it can also be defined as information that is uncertain, vague, or ambiguous. Disinformation, on the other hand, is information that is deliberately false and designed to mislead and sow confusion. Disinformation is considered born of maliciousness or ill intent. Fallis (2009, pp. 1–3) provides additional perspective by suggesting that disinformation is carefully planned, can come from individuals or groups, and can be disseminated by entities other than the originators. Similarly, malinformation is ‘genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation’ (Wardle 2018). Examples of malinformation include revenge porn and doxxing, which can be devastating and traumatic for the person(s) targeted. The scientific community defines disinformation as the ‘cultural production of ignorance’, and instead of using the term disinformation, they call it agnotology (Proctor & Schiebinger 2008, p. 1).
Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are much harder to discern in the online environment where there are 24-7 news cycles of information and media (both accurate and inaccurate) that often lack visual and aural clues, clues that in real life might alert an information consumer that something was faulty, misleading, or just incorrect. Because of the pervasiveness of addictive technologies in today’s world (the latest of which are deepfakes and shallow fakes (Solsman 2020), technological biases (Benjamin 2019), extreme political partisanship (Chadwick 2017), and people’s personal beliefs and emotional reactions to information and its sources (Cooke 2018a), it is especially important to be tuned in to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as they preclude understanding and informed action, both individually and collectively. Misinformation could ruin someone’s dinner plans because there is an error in a printed recipe; misinformation could prevent someone from voting because precinct information was omitted or the precinct number transposed. If deliberately erroneous, this incorrect information could contribute to a severe allergic reaction or voter suppression, which are much more serious. Malinformation such as illegally captured and distributed personal information like intimate photos or social security numbers could lead to job loss, identity theft, and a host of other detrimental outcomes from which the victim may not be able to recover.

Additionally, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation actually cause harm by deliberately and ferociously reinforcing racist and culturally insensitive images and messages. Zhou and Zhang (2007, p. 804) state, ‘with the growing use of Internet and ubiquitous information access, misinformation is pervasive on the Internet and disseminated through online communication media, which could lead to serious consequences for individuals, organisations, and/or the entire society at large’. There is no shortage of examples of information and media that not only publicise stereotypes about racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and other minority or marginalised communities, but also literally cause lasting harm to these populations. These stereotypes are so persistent that they can embolden people’s implicit biases and cause them to grow out of control like a cancer, and these biases influence behaviour and thoughts, whether people are cognisant of that impact or not (Banaji & Greenwald 2016). A stunning example of this began in 2020 with the rapid onset of COVID-19, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. It was widely thought that the virus originated in the Wuhan province of China (other disinformation claimed that the virus was man made), and as a result, rampant and hateful physical attacks were showered upon Asian and Asian American people, whether they were Chinese or not. Malinformation and the recalcitrant calling the virus by racist names such as the ‘China virus’, the ‘Chinese virus’, or the ‘kung flu’ incited ignorant people (or, for the purposes of this chapter, information and media illiterate people) around the world to hit, kick, stab, and spit on anyone with Asian features (Rogers et al. 2020). This is an example of information being repeated over and over again in the media until it became accepted and almost normalised and, as a result, significantly m arred and exacerbated an already-difficult global pandemic with xenophobia, racism, hatred, and violence.

Media and information literacy responses to misinformation

Media and information literacies have long been taught in libraries and classrooms, and with the recent uptick in fake news and discussions about misinformation and disinformation, there have been innumerable articles, books, and games designed to educate consumers about the perils of false information (e.g. the News Literacy Project’s Checkology game). The News Literacy Project (https://newslit.org/), PEN America (https://pen.org/advocacy-campaign/fraudulent-news/), First Draft (https://firstdraftnews.org/), the Factual (www.thefactual.com/
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about.html), the Misinformation Review Journal (https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/), the Center for News Literacy (www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/), the American Library Association (www.ala.org/), and Project Navigate (www.navigateproject.eu/) are but a few consortia of educators, librarians, and journalists working diligently to combat misinformation and disinformation, and they have provided quality tools and strategies to enable teachers to better relay this content to enable students of all ages so they can better discern the information they consume.

For all of the good that the aforementioned groups do with their research and carefully vetted resources and curricula, there are gaps they currently do not fill and audiences they do not reach. Current efforts and responses around fake news, misinformation, and disinformation are seen as academic and are not widely available to the general public and to those who secure their information and ‘news’ on social media platforms. Even those who have had literacy instruction and acquired some level of formal education about misinformation and disinformation do not or cannot always automatically transfer their evaluation skills to popular information. Literacy efforts are also lost on those who are willfully ignorant and remain committed to their echo chambers and filter bubbles; no matter the factual information presented, they will not depart from their emotional attachments and beliefs. There are also people who believe that they are immune to false information and/or feel that interventions to the contrary do not apply to them (e.g. the coronavirus pandemic has revealed any number of people and communities that have said that they didn’t believe they could catch the virus, and if they did it, wouldn’t be worse than getting a cold).

These are the gaps that information and media literacies currently do not meet and need to bridge. Instruction and education need to be less academic and more relevant, and they need to meet their intended audiences where they are, which is outside formal classrooms, libraries, and research settings. Educators, librarians, and journalists need to continue developing information and appropriate platforms and pedagogies for non-academic information seekers and users.

Part of the solution: critical media consumption through multiple literacies

The romanticised lens of populism as a tool of empowerment and democracy provides a vital moment for a brief discussion of media and information literacies as combatants of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation; these literacies, and others, are by design intended to empower people to become savvy information consumers and informed, proactive citizens. This is especially important with the type and amount of information humans regularly face. No one can absorb and utilise all the information that presents itself in the course of a day. As a result, people have implicit and explicit ways of filtering and prioritising information for use. Information and media literacies aim to strengthen and make inherent mental schemas more critical.

Media and information literacies aspire to impart a sense of ‘civic agency’ in students and information consumers. These literacies want to advance ‘the power of “the people” to shape their destiny’ (Boyte 2012, p. 173), and they rely on organising and civic education efforts (p. 174) to empower citizens. However, where these literacies tend to fall short, at least in the library and information science and related disciplines, is in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Information and media literacies encourage students to think critically about the quality and origin of information sources, but they don’t always go further and deeper to encourage the examination of the sociocultural and socioinstitutional structures that create and shape said information and media. This gap can prohibit information consumers from...
recognising xenophobia, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and other oppressions as constructs created and perpetuated by information and media. Subsequently, it is not uncommon for people to share problematic jokes, memes, and other content and think that it is not a big deal or not harmful because the inherent context is not the focus of traditional literacy education. Identifying problematic content is often addressed as a separate skillset, distinct from literacy education, that is taught in the social sciences (as opposed to communication studies, education, library and information science, and other applied disciplines).

The apotheosised version of populism values and combines equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice ‘with a deep commitment to people’s agency and appreciation of the immense particularity of American communities’ (Boyte 2012, p. 175). In order to fully match the tenets of populism, media and information literacies need to do better, they need to go deeper, and they need to be more current, candid, and contextual.

**Information Literacy**

Information literacy is an area of pedagogy and study most closely associated with library and information science. It is used prolifically in libraries and refers to the ability to read, decipher, evaluate, and use information in everyday life (Kulthau 1987). Information literacy is not the same as traditional reading-based literacy; rather, it refers to a frame of reference for consuming information and is a type of critical thinking. Information literacy considers the local context in which information is found and consumed (i.e. the who, what, where, when, and why of the source), and it seeks information that is relevant to a task and has long-term potential to be useful. Information literacy is widely taught in libraries with the goal of enabling students and patrons to locate and utilise quality information.

**Critical information literacy**

More recent literature and information literacy practices focus on critical information literacy (Accardi et al. 2010; Bawden, 2008; Bawden & Robinson, 2002; Elmborg 2006; Tisdell 2008), which extends information literacy by setting forth the expectation that in addition to looking at information in situ, people should recognise and understand the underlying power structures that shape information and media and subsequently grant agency to those acquiring quality information (or deny agency to those lacking quality information or to those who are unable to acquire any needed information). As the old adage goes, information is power, and this is played out in the proverbial ‘haves and have nots’ and in the digital divide. The digital divide was again put under a harsh spotlight during the COVID-19 crisis when students of all ages were sent home to learn online. It is a privilege to have the time, infrastructure, hardware, software, and funds to learn online, and not everyone has such privilege.

Critical information literacy is useful when understanding that cultural messages in particular are prone to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation because it suggests examining information and media in context and outside the vacuums in which they are often found (Cooke 2018b). However, it does not go far enough in terms of explaining why cultural messages in particular are prone to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. The why requires recentring people and information from other cultures and intentionally examining media and information through a populist lens (please see the final section on critical cultural literacy).
Media literacy

Scholar Belinha De Abreu defines media literacy as follows:

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. But what are ‘media’? In the broadest sense, media are the tools and systems that are used to store and deliver information and data to large numbers of people. Media are thus the pathways of communication that are used to reach, inform, entertain, or influence people on a wide scale. That media include television and radio, newspapers and magazines, advertising, movies and videos, book publishing and photography, as well as various networks, platforms, outlets, and forums on the Internet. To put it briefly, the media are vehicles for mass communication.

(De Abreu 2019, p. 3)

De Abreu goes on to detail the further distinctions and complexities contained within the umbrella term ‘media’. Because media and information are indeed nuanced, she goes on to say:

Media literacy involves critical thinking. To think that it does not would make the study of media literacy a passive undertaking, rather than an engaged dynamic. In truth, much of the media is consumed without a critical lens. The idea of media literacy is that we are actively involved in how we perceive, discuss, or consider the media we consume and the media we use in our lives.

(De Abreu 2019, p. 3)

Key to De Abreu’s definition are the ideas that media (and information) should be engaged with actively and through a critical lens. This is where current information and media literacies often fall short.

Because so much media and information are sought and consumed online, digital, media, and visual literacy skills are also important to consider and incorporate. These related concepts of digital, media, and visual literacies are essentially about being ‘deeply literate in the digital world’ and being ‘skilled at deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the syntactical subtleties of words’ (Lanham 1995, p. 198). Glister (1997) describes digital literacy as a mastery of ideas and not the mastery of keystrokes. Media literacy narrows the focus a bit by focusing on mass media such as television and radio, and it can also encompass video games and print products such as comic books and graphic novels. Visual literacy (also known as graphic literacy) is not limited only to electronically accessed images; it asks information and media consumers to decipher visual imagery and the intentional and unintentional messages contained within. This trio of literacies complement media and information literacies, and they are particularly important to understanding misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that are transmitted through memes, videos, infographics, and other forms of non-print information.

Cultural literacy (cultural competence)

In some disciplines, cultural literacy is equated to being well versed in current events and historical and pop culture. But in the context of this discussion, cultural literacy is synonymous with cultural competence. Cultural competence is defined as ‘a highly developed ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently’ (Overall 2009, p. 176). Cultural competence is an ongoing and dynamic
cyclical process that celebrates and incorporates the differences that exist within various populations and communities (Cooke 2016, chapter 2). Cultural competence came out of the applied health sciences and is also discussed in the education, nursing, psychology, counseling, and business management literatures (also known as cultural intelligence).

With this background in mind, cultural literacy can be thought of as information that is reflective of and centred on diverse and marginalised communities and their cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings 1995). A strong understanding of cultural literacy is particularly useful when battling misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as they pertain to cultural messages and the perpetuation of stereotypes, racism, and implicit biases. Cultural literacy facilitates the understanding of why cultural messages are particularly prone to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

**Critical cultural literacy**

In order to fully understand the aforementioned why; to clearly recognise how misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are so frequently racialised; and to really see how information devoid of context perpetuates that same racialised information and media, critical cultural literacy is required. Combining the foundational characteristics and purpose of traditional information and media literacies and reinforcing them with the best components of critical literacy and cultural literacy gives us critical cultural literacy. Critical cultural literacy is a strengthened literacy that best lives up to an idealised concept of populism. This is how media and information literacies do better, go deeper, and become more current, candid, and contextual.

Critical cultural literacy recentres marginalised and oppressed groups or content, allowing the information/media consumer to view what’s relevant and useful from another and more robust vantage point. Critical cultural literacy situates information and media in such a way that diverse messages are purposefully incorporated, highlighted, and valued and not relegated to an afterthought or ignored all together.

As previously mentioned, there is no shortage of misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation on the internet. And despite their swift dissemination and staying power, critical cultural literacy can aid in verifying and refuting false, misleading, and harmful media and information. In order to be critical consumers of media and information, users should, of course, question the currency of the information (or lack thereof), consider where it’s been published (or not published), consider the plausibility of the information, and consider the reputation and biases of the platform providing the information. But they should also be questioning and investigating the larger and cultural contexts of the information being presented and consider the bigger picture of what the message is trying to accomplish. Critical information consumption is not automatic, and information and media consumers need to be taught to evaluate, sort, and effectively use the overabundance of information available online, and they need to be versed in multiple forms of literacy (Daniels 2009, pp. 192–194).

**Concluding critical cultural thoughts**

Critical cultural literacy is not all that radical; rather, it requires thought and recognition that are decolonised and culturally competent. Put simply, decolonisation asks that ideas and communities outside the heteronormative norm be sought out and accepted (i.e. accepting more than just what is white, wealthy, Christian, heterosexual, thin, male, etc.); cultural competence asks that these differences be valued and incorporated into a new normative schema.
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For example, please consider these examples of topics that might be addressed by media and information literacy education and notice the changes between ‘regular’ literacy, critical literacy, and critical cultural literacy.

Topic 1: African Americans and COVID-19

Traditional literacy: after refuting the misinformation that African Americans cannot contract the coronavirus that results in COVID-19, it is further revealed that African Americans and other minority communities are actually suffering disproportionately from the virus.

Critical literacy: Minority communities routinely suffer more severely from illnesses, so it stands to reason that the same would be the case with COVID-19.

Critical cultural literacy: Minority communities have long been predisposed to underlying conditions such as hypertension and diabetes that make them more susceptible to illnesses like COVID-19. Also, minority groups, especially African Americans, have long-term trust issues with traditional medicine because of a systemic lack of access to treatment, medical biases that preclude them from getting the same treatment as non-minorities (e.g. the maternal death rate is significantly higher for African American women), and the legacy of experimentation by and maltreatment from the medical establishment (e.g. the Tuskegee experiments).

Topic 2: Remote learning and COVID-19

Traditional literacy: Remote learning is the solution during crises like COVID-19. With instruction, students can use their computers to complete coursework.

Critical literacy: Not all communities/families are able to work at home because they lack the infrastructure and hardware to do so (i.e. the digital divide).

Critical cultural literacy: Not all communities/families are able to work at home because, in addition to a lack of infrastructure and hardware, they are facing job loss, a lack of income, a lack of child care, and even a lack of technological capabilities from prior inadequate educational experiences.

Critical cultural literacy breaks open the vacuum that often contains information and media people consume and provides additional worlds of context that facilitate new perspectives and increased understanding. It takes a little extra legwork and openness to being uncomfortable with said context, but the rewards of amplified insight far surpass that discomfort.

Scholar Arundhati Roy provides another example of how to view a current event (COVID-19) through a critical cultural lens. She writes:

The virus has moved freely along the pathways of trade and international capital, and the terrible illness it has brought in its wake has locked humans down in their countries, their cities and their homes. But unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest — thus far — in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine.

(Roy 2020, para. 4–5)
Critical cultural (populist) literacy enables information and media consumers to look beyond the problem at hand and instead incorporate context and new perspectives in order to seek community-empowered solutions and change.

**Conclusion: going beyond academia**

Literacy education, particularly in the populist sense, is about sharing information and building equitable, knowledgeable, engaged, and empowered communities. Part of this mission is to make sure that constituents are literate in a multitude of areas and are able to seek, differentiate, and select quality, culturally relevant information and media and subsequently apply them to their daily lives. The goal of literacy as an emancipatory social force through which marginalised groups challenge dominant power structures is precisely the stance and meaning behind critical cultural literacy. Communities can be taught and be empowered (especially communities that are disenfranchised, marginalised, and discriminated against) with critical cultural literacy skills to fight media misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. However, it takes work (on the part of the educators and community members), a shift in the paradigm of what literacy education is, and a commitment to disrupting the status quo. Critical cultural information and media literacies ‘cannot be treated as a panacea’ (Bulger & Davison 2018, p. 3), especially in this age of rampant fake news, but they are certainly strong and substantial players in this landscape and benefit a ‘diverse array of stakeholders’ (p. 3).

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Media and information literacies


