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Tackling online disinformation through media literacy in Spain: the project 'Que no te la cuelen'

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ABSTRACT

Media literacy of schoolchildren is a key political goal worldwide: institutions and citizens consider media literacy training to be essential –among other aspects– to combat falsehoods and generate healthy public opinion in democratic contexts. In Spain, various media literacy projects address this phenomenon one of which is 'Que no te la cuelen' ('Don't be fooled', QNTLC). The project, that has been developed by the authors of this viewpoint, is implemented through theoretical-practical workshops aimed at public and private secondary pupils (academic years

2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021), based around training in fake news detection strategies and online factchecking tools for students and teachers. This viewpoint describes and reflects on this initiative, conducted in 36 training sessions with schoolchildren aged 14-16 years attending schools in Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona. The workshops are based on van Dijk's (2005: 71-92) media literacy model, with a special focus on the 'informational skills' dimension. The amount of information available through all kind of online platforms implies an extra effort in selecting, evaluating and sharing information, and the workshop focuses on this process through 7 steps: suspect, read/listen/watch carefully, check the source, look for other reliable sources, check the data/location, be self-conscious of your bias and decide whether to share the information or not. The QNTLC sessions teach and train these skills combining gamification strategies –online quiz, verification challenges, 'infoxication' dynamics in the class– as well as through a public deliberation among students. Participants' engagement and stakeholders' interest in the program, suggests that this kind of training is important or, at least, attracts the attention of these collectives in the Spanish context.

KEYWORDS:
Fake news, disinformation, misinformation, media literacy, social media, training

1. MEDIA LITERACY AND DISINFORMATION

In a web 2.0 context of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information (UNESCO 2018), digital media literacy –a key objective on political agendas worldwide– emerges not only as an antidote but also as a buttress for a healthy democracy and public sphere (Culver and Jacobson 2012; Del-Moral and Villalustre 2013; Middaugh 2019; Comber and Grant 2018). The great levels of penetration of both Internet and social media and the fact that most of the population –and especially young people– obtain their information mainly from social media (Notley and Dezuanni 2018; Wade and Hornick 2018; Musgrove et al. 2018) means that media literacy is crucial, as pointed out by authors like Jenkins et al. (2009), Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) or Pérez-Escoda et al. (2016). While intensive use of the Internet by younger people may suggest the possession of more and better digital skills, this is not always the case. For example, although 71 per cent of respondents of a Eurobarometer report on this topic claimed they would be able to detect fake news (European Commission 2018b), this perception of their own abilities is frequently exaggerated. According to the Annual Report issued by the Madrid Press Association (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid 2018), 56 per cent of people do never or almost never factcheck social media information that seems suspicious. Nevertheless, in 2020, and in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, concern about misinformation remains globally high. Whereas contents shared through social media increase (Newman et al. 2020), trust in news media is higher than trust in unchecked news on social media.

The so-called Z Generation (Pérez-Escoda et al. 2016), i.e. those born between 1995 and 2012, has a specific way of interacting with digital devices. This generation percept themselves as expert and competent in informational and communication technologies, 'ascribing very high expectations towards technology' (auth. transl.) (Pérez-Escoda et al. 2016: 72). These expectations generate a false confidence regarding students' abilities to acquire what van Dijk (2005) calls 'informational skills', that is, the set of skills that allow us to select, evaluate and share information. These skills coexist with 'technical/operational skills' (van Dijk 2005), which are needed to use digital devices like computers, browsers, mobile phones, etc. According to Gui and Argentin (2011), informational skills among high school students are directly connected to the cultural background and the level of traditional literacy. In order to implement media literacy in school syllabuses, authors as Pérez-Escoda et al (2016) or Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) agree in not overestimating students' operational skills over the informational ones; as well as to involve teachers and parents in a critical, participative and effective educational process.

From this perspective, media literacy becomes a crucial resource to combat the disinformation phenomenon. Disinformation is defined by the European Commission (2018a) as 'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit' (2018a: 10). Recent research on how fake news is channelled through social media and its impact on the public sphere only serve to add to the unease (Vousoghi et al. 2018; Fletcher et al. 2018; etc). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the disinformation phenomenon, as reported by several authors (Newman et al. 2020; Victoria-Mas, 2021). The immediacy of social media, the sophistication of lies and falsehoods, as well as the precariousness of the journalistic profession fuel the circulation of fallacious content (Musgrove et al. 2018).

Despite being a problem in our current society, the roots of fake news can be traced to decades ago. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, governments, community institutions, information professionals, teachers and other entities already decried the 'dangerous' effects of television (Alsius 2018). Nevertheless, the call for media literacy has likewise been a demand for a long time. In Europe, first references to media literacy initiatives start to appear in 2006 with the creation of the Media Literacy Expert Group, which produced concrete recommendations by late 2007. More recently, the High-Level Group on Fake News and online disinformation has developed initiatives such as The Action Plan (2018) against disinformation[i], which contains the guidelines for media literacy policies regarding disinformation.

However, the implementation of this kind of training has been frequently lacking or uneven in different countries, receiving lukewarm support from governments and depending largely on the good will of individuals and institutions. In the case of Spain, digital skills are a central aspect of the guidelines Escuela 2.0 created and promoted by the Spanish government. Similarly, the Law 26/2015 recognizes the importance of digital and media literacy as an essential tool for children

and adolescents. Despite this recognition, the application of media literacy training is dispersing and lacks a standardized implementation strategy, increasing the existing gap between new online media uses and media literacy (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2020). In this context, the initiatives promoted by teachers, journalists, fact-checkers, and associations, such as AulaMèdia, Somatents, Drac Magic, the Catalan College of Journalists, Spanish Federation of Journalism Associations, etc. have been numerous but scattered. In fact, some of them are covering a media literacy training demand that has not been institutionally guaranteed (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al, 2020).

Traditionally, media literacy training has focused on critical reading of audiovisual products and their production and, to a lesser extent, on analyses of written press as a benchmark for news made available on other platforms (Notley and Deuzanni 2018: 4-7). Nevertheless, in the last 10 years this kind of training is also coming to cover the internet and social media. In this context, media literacy training is no longer limited to dealing with the 'dangers' of social media (Vanderhoven et al. 2014) but understanding new uses of information and new forms of social interaction (Shen et al. 2019). From this perspective, initiatives like the project analysed here start from the premise that social media are part of the problem but also of the solution to fake news (Musgrove et al. 2018: 11). New actors in the field of media literacy projects include, among others, the EduCAC initiative of the Catalan Audiovisual Council (Consell Audiovisual de Catalunya) to foster the production of online materials and courses in educational centres; the hoax exposure website Maldito Bulo and the startup Newtral; BBC courses in educational centres; the European Journalism Centre's online factchecking manual; online content and gamified challenges of First Draft News; educational materials from NewseumED in Washington; and the pedagogical content of Checkology, an initiative of the News Literacy Project (Wade and Hornick 2018; Ireland 2018). We must also mention that several of these media literacy projects, factcheckers and informative initiatives are often joined together in coordinated initiatives, such as the Plataforma per a l'Educació Mediàtica de Catalunya – promoted by the Consell Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC)– or the European Observatory Against Disinformation. Many of these projects are led by professional journalists or by public or private institutions. The breadth of target audiences is varied, but noteworthy are initiatives aimed at the secondary education level, as the stage when news consumption frequently begins in earnest. From an approach that places journalists at the centre, we consider 'Que no te la cuelen' project (translated approximately as 'Don't be fooled' and referred to in what follows as QNTLC) to be a paradigmatic example.

2. 'QUE NO TE LA CUELEN'

The QNTLC digital media literacy project, aimed at lower and upper secondary and vocational students, proposes educational interventions focused on the internet and social media that reveal the mechanisms underlying the construction and distribution of misinformation and

disinformation. To date, we have conducted 36 training sessions with pupils aged 14-16 years attending schools in Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona. The workshop relies on the 'informational skills' of the students, and its objectives are: (1) to understand what is meant by fake news as well as their perceptions of the personal and political/social consequences of fake news; and (2) to train in digital factchecking in order to build a rational process, based on select and evaluate information. A secondary goal of the initiative is related to the 'operational skills' dimension, especially when specific online tools for checking a webpage, an image, a video or a social media account or post are discussed. Financed and promoted by the US Consulate in Barcelona and the US Embassy in Madrid through American Space, the project consists of theoretical-practical workshops on digital factchecking run by specialist journalists. The workshops last four hours and take place either at a public library in Barcelona, Madrid or Valencia or at the requesting school and have accounts both on Twitter and Instagram.[ii] These profiles are used to implement practical exercises (partially gamified) and to disseminate digital factchecking tools and methods to other audiences (mainly teachers and journalists) following the initiative through these platforms. Considering the centrality of social media in the workshop, the no-restrictive online learning environment is a key point for the proposal development.

In this context, the workshop has two parts: (a) a component consisting of theory, debate and group dynamics; and (b) a practical gaming-based component in which students resolve different factchecking challenges applying the knowledge and tools acquired in the first part of the workshop. Regarding the theoretical background, concepts such as infoxication, fake news, disinformation and misinformation are explained, and workshop participants discuss how social media have changed the way we obtain information. Participants are shown how to verify whether content circulating on the internet is true or not by applying a checklist, based on 7 steps: suspect, read/listen/watch carefully, check the source, look for other reliable sources, check the data/location, be self-conscious of your bias and decide whether to share the information or not. These steps are based on other verification checklists developed by projects like First Draft, NewseumED or the Media Literacy Project. The students are also provided with tools and procedures for verifying photographs, videos, news, websites and social media accounts and are introduced to different initiatives in the journalism, health, and other fields that represent reliable sources of information. The practical part of the workshop unfolds on Twitter where, in competing teams of five to six members, workshop participants resolve various challenges designed around topical cases. In doing so, they need to use the resources acquired in from the theoretical component of the workshop, paying particular attention to reliable sources and reverse image searches, among other mechanisms for detecting false information.

The design of the QNTLC workshops is developed under the media literacy guidelines of researchers like Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) or Comber and Grant (2018) and relies on three main aspects. Firstly, a) the workshops must be participative, trying to engage students through gamification strategies. As some authors point out, media literacy must be taught 'in an active,

participative and playful way' (auth. transl.) (Ferrés and Piscitelli 2011: 78). Secondly, b) the workshop must intensively use social networks as a part of the gamification strategy. In this sense, authors like Notley and Dezuanni (2018) defend the centrality of social media as part of young people's experience and their integration in educational strategies. However, this position is criticized in some schools and high schools, where the access to online content is banned or restricted. In this context, the debate about how to educate in the use of these platforms is often more oriented to the 'dangers' of social media (Vanderhoven et al, 2014) rather than to its opportunities. Thirdly, another important aspect is c) the 'emotional' dimension of the disinformation phenomenon. As Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012: 78) point out, media literacy based on a multiscreen environment must pay attention to the emotional impact of online messages. Previous research has identified that the disinformation phenomenon is more effective when false information affects us emotionally, i.e. when it is aligned with our own experiences or ideology (Scheufele and Krause 2019; Musgrove et al. 2018; Jang and Kim 2018). We must point out that the Z Generation have a special preference for visual information (Pérez-Escoda et al. 2016: 72). For this reason, the workshop uses lots of visual material. A visual approach based on images is effective in easily and quickly transmitting complex content, specially to young people who inform themselves primarily through social media, as has been demonstrated in other initiatives (Shen et al. 2019; Ireland 2018). The use of visual material also enhances engagement in the classroom, as pointed out by Comber and Grant (2018: 331). In this sense, the workshop tries to demonstrate how disinformation works showing false images and videos that provoke an emotional reaction to the participants, thus leading them to 'believe' without checking the visual information.

3. TOWARDS THE NEED FOR ARTICULATING MEDIA LITERACY MEASURES

Initiatives like QNTLC are punctual but demonstrate the need for sustained media literacy training over time in classrooms. And do also expose other challenges, such as the approach the educational system takes on regarding social networks use. For instance, after our experience teaching these workshops, we believe there is a need for a policy that poses education in and with social media instead of prohibiting them or impeding their use in educational settings. We agree safe and controlled social media use by young people, teenagers, children (Vanderhoven 2014) and other vulnerable groups (Lee 2018) is necessary. However, we do also think that, whereas social media may be part of the problem, they are also part of the solution when it comes to combating fake news (Musgrove et al. 2018; Notley & Dezuanni, 2018; Shen et al. 2019). Given the potential of social media, the no-restrictive online learning environment could strength the curricula of secondary schools on this topic. In keeping with that, if we agree social media play a leading role in informing us (and we consider a well-informed society is essential for the proper functioning of democracy), training in digital media literacy must not only be promoted but also guaranteed by families, schools and public administrations. Therefore,

fighting fake news and disinformation is a task that cannot be left solely in the hands of young people.

In keeping with that, the practical part of the workshops indicates the problem does not only rely –as defined by Van Dijck (2005)– on the 'operational' or 'formal' skills, but in the 'informational' ones; especially regarding disinformation, a phenomenon based on a quick and emotional consumption of false information. Therefore, the skills of selecting, and overall, of evaluating information are crucial when we talk about disinformation. In this sense, European media literacy policies must focus on increasing democratic resilience. As Victoria-Mas (2021: 45) points out, 'media literacy should include civic education contents to foster a well-informed citizenry, balanced in news consumption, and able to build their opinion far from the most polarized extremes in their countries'.

We are conscious that the project must be improved through strong evidence about its effectiveness, but the interest showed by participants and stakeholders (institutions, journalism associations, High Schools, parents associations or teachers) suggest that this kind of training is important or, at least, attracts the attention of these collectives in the Spanish context. In our aim at contributing to the fight against disinformation, part of the QNTLC teaching and training material has been collected and redesigned (with new online materials, including videos, quiz, articles, teaching guides available for teachers, parents and students) in the open access platform Learn to Check (http://learntocheck.org).

In summary, the QNTLC workshops are a small example of how to articulate media literacy in the field of online verification. Their design, conceived for the so-called Generation Z, proposes the open use of social networks, gamification strategies, deliberative participation in the verification processes and the use of images and video as elements of emotional engagement. Their one-off delivery at High Schools in Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona, although well received by students, does not fail to underline the need for transversal media training promoted by specific policies at both the state and at a European level that includes teacher training.

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