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Front liners fighting fake news: global perspectives on mobilising young people as media literacy advocates

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ABSTRACT

With young people at the vanguard of technology adoption and media consumption, many governments are actively incorporating young people into their public education campaigns, and young people are enlisting themselves as media literacy advocates. This article reviews a selection of such media literacy programmes to unpack their key thrusts and components so as to identify best practices and learning points. It will also closely investigate one particular youth-led effort and chart its conception, execution and development.

KEYWORDS

Fake news; media literacy; digital literacy; public education; social media; young people

The rising adoption of digital technology worldwide has been accompanied by the growing scourge of fake news. There is thus an awakening realisation to the critical importance of media literacy, with policy makers experimenting with creative approaches in their public education efforts. Rather than being the sole preserve of schools and educators, media literacy is finally recognised as a skill that every media consumer must be vested with. One emerging trend around the globe is an active undertaking to mobilise young people as media literacy advocates by tapping into their natural affinity for technology and their avid media consumption. Rather than simply being schooled in media literacy skills, young people are now being drawn in to teach these skills to their peers, and sometimes to their parents and extended family.

Mobilising young people as advocates/ambassadors

Countries across the globe are making a concerted drive to boost media literacy and specifically, digital literacy among their young people. In the emerging economy of Brazil, media analysis studies have been made compulsory for school-going children since December 2017 (The Straits Times, 2018). The country's most recent initiative, EducaMídia, was launched in June 2019 to train basic education teachers on digital literacy skills that can be imparted to children and adolescents (Estarque, 2020). All training is free and has reached 2,500 educators via face-to-face workshops and another 5,600 online. EducaMídia is also involved in Inova Educação, a São Paulo state government program that introduced new curricular content related to technology including

“Muito Além das “Fake News”” (Far Beyond “Fake News”). This initiative potentially impacts 2 million students.

In Vietnam, one of Southeast Asia’s less developed yet fastest growing countries, the lack of credible government agencies promoting digital and media literacy has drawn international partners to aid in this cause. In January 2019, the Swedish Embassy in the capital city of Hanoi launched the “Fake ≠ Fact” toolkit for secondary and high school teachers and students (An Nhien, 2019). Instructions and exercises aim to inspire teachers to educate and interact with their students on the topic of false online information. Students are taught to critically assess information sources as well as to analyse and deconstruct online language and arguments before creating original videos to raise public awareness of fake information online.

In more well-resourced countries, the training for young people is significantly more systematic and comprehensive. France has one of the world’s most extensive national media and internet literacy efforts to train students from middle school and beyond to spot false online information. Since 2015, the French government has increased funding for courses about the downsides of the online world, equipping about 30,000 teachers and other educational professionals with digital literacy training annually. Some local authorities have even introduced a requirement that young adults complete an internet literacy course to receive welfare benefits. At an internet literacy workshop outside Paris, students were tasked with creating their own false news articles as an exercise in critical literacy and self-awareness (Satariano & Peltier, 2018). In another course by an investigative journalist, French high school students were screened a fake conspiracy mini-documentary before being taught how to evaluate the veracity of a news story (Beardsley, 2018). Overall, these initiatives point to a country that is struggling with the problem of fake news as manifested in its introduction of relevant anti-fake news laws. But they also demonstrate that legislation is being complemented by an active engagement of young people.

Many of these programmes adopt an experiential, learning-by-doing approach by giving young people a taste of news creation so that they distil valuable insights. The Italian government, in collaboration with Facebook, has been proactively training a new generation of students in safe Internet use as well as recognising fake news and conspiracy theories through class assignments prepared by reporters. High school students are educated about the political economy dimensions of social media enterprises, learning how their Facebook “likes” are monetised and politicised. They have been roped in as “fake-news hunters” (Horowitz, 2017) and encouraged to reach out to experts to verify fake news and re-report the stories by calling out the falsehoods in a bid to educate others. In the same vein, the UK’s National Literacy Trust (2018) stresses in their free online public education resources that in teaching critical digital literacy to students, educators should encourage young people to gain practical experience of responsible news creation to demystify how news is made.

Besides the clear interest to ramp up the digital literacy of young people in light of the growing onslaught of fake news, another distinct motivation in many countries is insulating its people against foreign interference by bad actors in their domestic politics. In this regard, Finland has been proactive. As early as 2014, two years before Russia meddled in the US elections, Finland had already launched an anti-fake news initiative for citizens of all ages. In their social studies classes and through digital literacy toolkits, Finnish students

from elementary through to high school were trained to become “digital detectives” to spot disinformation online by examining claims on YouTube and social media, comparing media bias in clickbait articles, and authoring their own fake news stories (Mackintosh, 2019). These efforts seemed to bear fruit as in March 2018, Finland ranked first out of 35 European countries in a study measuring resilience to the post-truth phenomenon.

In Ukraine too, since 2018, five years after the war in eastern Ukraine between government forces and Russia-backed separatists that saw a subsequent surge in propaganda and disinformation, high school students across the country have been primed to better identify fake stories, propaganda and hate speech via the “Listen to Discern” programme funded by the US and UK. Students who attended these media literacy lessons were found to be twice as likely to detect hate speech and 18% better at identifying fake news than students who missed the lessons (Ingber, 2019).

Notably, governments have not had to go it alone in boosting their young citizens’ digital literacy. Technology companies have also stepped forward as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes. “Be Internet Awesome” is a media literacy education programme initiated by Google in 2017. As of June 2019, in collaboration with The Net Safety Collaborative and the Internet Keep Safe Coalition, Google added six new media literacy activities into the programme curriculum targeting children in the US. These activities train children in determining information source credibility, identifying and responding to online deceptions such as phishing attempts and detecting bots posing as humans through key vocabulary, class discussions, and gameplay (Be Internet Awesome, 2019; Houser, 2019). Social media giant Facebook has also striven to promote media literacy, likely also a strategic effort to repair its battered reputation following the Cambridge Analytica scandal. It launched its Digital Literacy Library in 2018 to provide educational resources for educators of children aged 11 to 18 to address topics like privacy, reputation, and wellbeing. It also introduced its Youth Portal to offer educational material directly to teens, principally explaining to them how Facebook works, but also hosting a blog for young people to share media literacy tips with each other. The thrust of these technology companies’ media literacy initiatives is essentially one of direct youth engagement.

Fundamentally, these public and private sector initiatives to equip young people with media literacy skills have the potential to build competencies, drive empowerment, and inspire agency. Vested with critical discernment, these young people have the potential to engage in their own advocacy efforts to champion media literacy. XS News is one such an initiative by young people for young people that seeks to enhance media literacy.

Case study: XS news

XS News is an Instagram-based news account that aims to “turn excess information into XS-sized news articles” so that news is more comprehensible for young people. The initiative was started by Marco Andono Sie and Alexander Brown with the help of Kai Ryn Tan, three 16-year old high school students based in Singapore and Indonesia. They share the conviction that knowledge of world news is more vital than ever in an increasingly globalised world and developed XS News when they realised that their teenaged friends do not actively keep up with current affairs. Upon probing their peers, they discovered that this apparent apathy was due not to a lack of interest, but to their

struggle with understanding lengthy news articles containing complex economic, political and technical jargon. Another stumbling block was their lifestyle. Teens' hectic schedules tend to be filled with academic commitments and extra-curricular activities, thereby depriving them of the time needed to read news regularly. To address these issues, XS News posts concise summaries of important global events and topics on Instagram, the most widely-used platform among teens in Singapore (and various other countries in Asia, Europe and North America).

After developing the concept and writing their own posts for three months, the team has since expanded its stable of writers and graphic designers whom they recruited online, receiving applications from diverse geographical regions including countries such as Indonesia, India, Canada, USA and Chile. All of the XS News content creators work pro bono and are individually credited for each post with their Instagram handle being tagged. This gives the creators a sense of pride and ownership, but also the valuable opportunity to directly experience what it means to be a news purveyor.

XS News covers mostly current events, posting at least once a day and when the situation arises, it also posts Instagram stories featuring breaking news. The editorial team maintains an active list of topics to be featured and schedules them according to global developments, supplementing current events with posts on concepts, historical milestones, and famous personalities. They have reported on issues such as the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya people and the Brexit saga, reviewed epochal events such as the Yalta Conference and introduced prominent public figures such as Tsai Ing Wen, Sundar Pichai, and Julian Assange. To address young people's poor financial knowledge, they have also explained the basics of economics and business with posts on inflation and the origins and uses of bitcoin, for example.

For each post, the writers typically review news reports and reference materials from reputable international sources before condensing the information into 300 words or less, formatted as short paragraphs or bullet points for a quick and easy read. Complex terms are rephrased and more obscure ones eliminated. When the use of certain terminology is unavoidable, the writers offer simple definitions to educate readers. The editorial team reviews each writer's post for grammar, comprehensibility and house style, before sending it on to the graphic designers for formatting and posting.

Responses to XS News have been positive from teens following the account, liking posts, and sharing that they find the bite sized news stories appealing and easy to understand. Followers of the XS News account also message the team with requests and feedback on other topics they should cover. From such interactions, the founders have learnt a great deal about engaging audiences, monitoring social media traffic, and leveraging network dynamics, tapping the reach of influencers and "decoding" the algorithmic structures of these platforms. To be sure, they have also received negative feedback and discouraging comments but these adverse experiences provide precious learning moments. The editorial team has consequently gained deep insights into the nature of social media interactions and the online disinhibition that users exhibit through posting obnoxious comments and trolling behaviour. The team has also become more sensitised to the polarised nature of political views and learnt to use more value-neutral language as well as to express their ideas in an impartial manner to cater to their diverse audience.

The team has also received recognition in the form of angel investor funding. Co-founders Andono Sie and Brown represented XS News at the Young Founders Summit in Beijing in

October 2019, an international competition that awards seed funding to promising ideas by young people. XS News won the competition, providing funding and professional mentoring by industry experts to accelerate their media literacy endeavours. Since then, the XS News youth have been busy beefing up their skills by developing a proprietary XS News app, learning how to code, and starting a companion TikTok account to boost user engagement across multiple platforms. Their goal is to make XS News even more user-friendly by posting short informative videos and giving users the ability to curate the type of news they want to see.

Learning points

Fundamentally, we should not assume that young people's fluency with digital gadgets translates seamlessly into an ability to assess the credibility of online information. Instead, young people need to be taught to look beyond the surface of online information and ascertain the organisations behind it and to infer their motives (Breakstone, McGrew, Smith, Ortega, & Wineburg, 2018). Hence, media literacy education in the face of our digitalizing environment should be more than a technological fix but must seek to fortify audiences' cultural competencies, social skills, and knowledge bases (Buckingham, 2015). The media literacy programmes reviewed earlier demonstrate a considerable effort to apprise young people of these areas. Importantly also, these programmes have experimented with innovative ways by which to highlight key lessons in digital literacy such as through experiential, learning-by-doing approaches where young people have direct encounters with what it means to be a media producer and even a purveyor of fake news.

The journey of the founders of XS News offers especially useful learning points. Principally, when a media literacy effort is of, for, and by young people, the resonance between the content created and its target audience is that much greater due to the empathy the creators have for their readers. The personal insights the XS News founders had about young people led them to more intimately appreciate how news had to be packaged to best reach and engage their peers. As editor-in-chief Kai Ryn Tan's instructions to all writers notes, "write as if you are explaining something to your 11 or 12-year-old sibling." This advice helps the writers formulate their posts in ways that strike a chord with readers and gives XS News a punchy, youthful and authentic voice that is quite distinct from conventional news. At the same time, the editorial team conducts regular surveys using the Instagram voting feature to solicit readers' feedback on topics to cover, and also on their post format and layout. These exchanges give the readers a sense of shared ownership in the news channel and fosters sustained interest in following the XS News account.

Media literacy programmes that draw young people in as ambassadors to spread the mantra and guide their peers will likely have greater impact than something that is more top down. By producing their own "news channel," the creators of XS News also acquired a more in-depth perspective of the nature of news production and the characteristics of social media platforms, thus sharpening their own critical literacy. This further underlines the utility of media literacy programmes that incorporate learning-by-doing experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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