Media Education - A Major Challenge for our Era

Mireille Carrere, Consultant, France

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.or

By encouraging debate, the media play a critical role in democratic societies. It is for this reason that it is crucial for us to understand how the media function at a time of universal access to overabundant data. But it is also important to be aware of how information is "manufactured" and to learn how to detect "superficial objectivity" and "deceptive knowledge." In our hyper-informed, hyper-connected universe, we all need to understand how the media and the Internet developed and led to the rise of infotainment and omnipresent modelling based on "big data."

The prospect of an education program of this type raises several questions. First, with respect to the traditional media, can experiments in participative knowledge made possible by digital technologies that make everyone a data producer cause social change by reducing social and cultural inequalities? What worldview will the evolution of this immaterial economy reflect? Learning to understand the complexity of the information society requires a form of apprenticeship. International recommendations have encouraged the development of a type of "media competence" that would train students to assert their rights to examine and critically assess this world of data. Indeed, what is needed is to reduce citizens' "structural gullibility" about the "transcendental illusion of the media," in the words of the late philosopher Jacques Derrida.

I) Detecting "superficial objectivity"
Many media professionals claim to utter only truth and simply to transcribe reality. While this is a laudable intention, it is clear that it is far from the case. First, the exponential growth in the production of information causes the sheer volume to double every eight years, but also constitutes an anarchic avalanche of duplicate and often inaccurate information, if not "true rumors." Verification thus becomes considerably more difficult.

In the same way, the prevalence of immediacy and directness do not nurture analysis or deliberate reflection. As Baudrillard has observed, "the closer we come to the real time of an event, the more we fall into the illusion of the virtual," where reality is of necessity distorted by this temporal short-circuit. Information exhausts itself in its own instantaneousness; it is not History in the present, but instead, an ahistorical present that reveals the anecdotal more than the essential.

The imperatives of competitiveness and marketing simply reinforce the production of sugarcoated information that tends, in fact, to move in the direction of infotainment and a kind of globalized "show-biz." Crafting and composing become staging, transforming information into a "major branch of industry". The inevitable over-exposure to the spectacular is obviously accompanied by other orchestrations. First is the illusion of veracity : We believe we are speaking the truth although even the simplest re-framing is both a snapshot and an opinion ! Information is always fabricated and relative, and the subjectivity that is inherent in this fabrication has difficulty taking into account the complexity of the real. Certainties replace questionings, and dysfunctions are brought into focus, one of the legitimate roles of the press, but also one that increases the imbalance.

In the same way, the illusion of verisimilitude - i.e., of what might correspond to our idea of what is real - can also distort the situation: closure, assumptions, and conforming to a single thought pattern shape facts to fit representations. This

ideological prism prevents verification of information that resonates with the dominant idea, as appearance becomes a substitute for reality. We are no longer facing a "deciphered reflection" of reality, but instead, a "projected reconstruction." Above all, this kind of fusion-confusion hijacks deeper aspects of the culture and politics and helps transform the counter-force of the media into a fourth power.

This is why it is so vitally important to develop information skills at school, the mission of the French organization called the CLEMI (*Centre de Liaison de l'enseignement et des médias d'information*/Center for Connecting Teaching and Media Information) since it was founded in 1983. The CLEMI organizes media education throughout the French educational system, with the purpose of teaching students to be media-savvy citizen, with an annual press week in the schools "by initiating them into the complexities of the production of information, students develop independence and initiative and become aware of the role of the media and their influence in society." In 1989, the UNESCO Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees - the right to freedom of expression, to access to information and to participate in cultural life - named media education as a basic human right. In theory at least, this paves the way for the rise of informed citizens who can verify the traceability of information and serve as skilled and effective "receivers" and producers of data.

Should the "right to communicate" provided by the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man be interpreted as a guarantee, in addition to access, of the right to create and disseminate information? Citizen journalism, in which millions of individuals act as a network, represents a prime example of this poly-vocal critical process. AgoraVox is one of the first interactive European achievements in this domain. By focusing on information on a vast scale, amateur reporters contribute to a collective body of knowledge that is perpetually evolving to adapt to a changing world, and that limits the dominance of traditional social hierarchies.

Blogs, which are essentially open diaries, are also used as sources of information that are particularly useful in contexts involving censorship. Initiatives such as these that promote "informational and communicational intelligence" if they avoid the perils of disinformation, by providing alternatives to the preponderance of the established media, enhance the credibility of the entire media system and, in the process, reinforce the democratic elements of society.

II) Stalking "misleading knowledge"
In the same sense that the media do not necessarily describe reality or facts, the Internet cannot be considered as a reservoir of knowledge. Data and information do not inherently add value. It is how they are divided and regrouped, validated, and synthesized that will produce relevant and reliable information and in turn, via contextualization, knowledge.

This is the case with scientific information stored in databases, and also with isolated knowledge dispersed in big data "clouds," some of it without any value as information, particularly in the infinite variety of opinions scattered across myriad forums and blogs.
Progress in new digital technologies has provided remote access to vast amounts of documentation, but finding information using on-line networks and databases is not as

easy as one might think. The access to knowledge that such sites provide is interfered with by factors such as the "noise" (irrelevant information) or "silence" (missing information). The first difficulty concerns accessibility, because learning the search procedures for research engines requires skills that users do not necessarily possess.

It is nevertheless primarily knowledge of how information is developed that should form the basis of a well-adapted critical approach. It is important to know, for example, that the information obtained will not necessarily be exhaustive because certain fields of knowledge are not covered, just as one can better detect a lack of precision, and one is more likely to have the reflex of verifying sources despite the fact that layers of intermediaries can render verification impossible.

The logic of "real time" and immediacy, although they offer the illusion of immediate access, can also be misleading. There appears to be a lack of systematic updating of information or, worse, recent information that coexists with obsolete information.
The hidden face of the algorithmic treatment of data also raises questions because it is sometimes linked to industrial and economic interests, as well as to marketing. The references proposed by research engines and comparison sites are good examples that raise questions about the quality and reliability of the information obtained by automated systems, underscoring the relative nature of knowledge. Data flows are now stored in massive systems - a truly amorphous abstraction called a cloud - that represents billions upon billions of bits of information organized in spaces with over one hundred dimensions, and this fragmentation offers the possibility of generating new elements of information.

Two additional drawbacks that also appear to impede the quality of knowledge supplied by the Internet also merit attention. The first is what could be described as "digital information reductionism" : More qualitative or intuitive aspects of reality that cannot be apprehended through binary logic and are unable to be represented by digitized systems. This is also true of existing data, and an identity cannot be reduced to a navigation profile ! Google's promises to make all of the world's knowledge available at a single click seem to invoke the ideology of the omnipotent technical world more than they do real potential.

Another pitfall involves the widespread development of modeling procedures. Indeed the construction of metadata and the power of algorithms transform these new knowledge management systems into an authentic strategic development that converts raw data into "informational gold." An infinite number of fields are concerned by an optimized decision-making process. For example, models that provide measurements to support risk assessments are highly prized in fields such as health, security, and insurance.

Nevertheless, this method of treating data is not immune to error, because the predictive aspects are not infallible, they are based on probabilistic computations, erroneous extrapolations and invalid results are sometimes obtained. Furthermore, as the sociologist Dominique Cardon has observed, the reach of these models is limited to the extent that data from the past are used to represent the future. It also appears that these new forms of computation are intrinsically linked to the logics of "algorithmic truth" of the techno-industrial world. Moreover, the infinite range of

problems in modern society cannot be fully grasped, despite innovative solutions such as machines that are able to self-program.

This informational universe of computations and networks whose mechanisms remain partially invisible must also be submitted to the rigors of a critical education. The European Parliament acknowledged the importance of learning informational and digital competence in a 2006 recommendation in favor of a "critical and reflective attitude towards available information and a responsible utilization of interactive tools." Asking questions about the reliability of digital information is all the more urgent in the present context, notably in academic contexts. University–level methodology courses have been created to teach students to refine their searches, optimize their use of tools and procedures, identify sources, and decipher the information that they obtain.

These skills should encourage new experiments such as participative encyclopedias - like Wikipedia and others - by exploiting self-edited digital content, which promote emerging knowledge, breaking the monopoly of experts and scholars. The stakes of a "citizen-based regulation" should be taken into account in order to enable us to articulate new forms of knowledge with each other while discovering unexpected new realities among the structures brought to light by big data.

In this way, the increasingly skilled and info-aware citizens who benefit from media education will fully participate in the "knowledge-based society" that is already here and in the new forms of "intelligence" that many thinkers ardently hope are emerging in the process.