

Media and Information Literacy and Alternative Media¹

Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa y Medios Alternativos

Alfabetização Mediática e Informativa e Mídia Alternativa

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Abstract: This article explores the current role of alternative media as forms of media and information literacy in the face of the rise of fake news and misinformation resulting from the democratization of media through the internet and the incursion of non-professional communication or journalism entities into the information biosphere, in addition to the use of social networks as propaganda and support for official narratives to undermine democracy.

Keywords:

Media Literacy, Disinformation, Fake News, Alternative Media, Media, Internet

Resumen: Este artículo explora el papel que tienen actualmente los medios alternativos como formas de alfabetización mediática e informativa ante el aumento de noticias falsas y desinformación derivadas de la democratización de los medios por internet y de la incursión en la biósfera informativa por entes no profesionales de la comunicación o el periodismo, además del uso de redes sociales como propaganda y soporte de narrativas oficiales para socavar la democracia.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetización mediática, Desinformación, Noticias falsas, Medios alternativos,

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Democratización de los medios

Resumo: Este artigo examina o papel dos meios alternativos na alfabetização midiática e informacional, especialmente diante do aumento da desinformação e das notícias falsas no ecossistema digital. A democratização dos meios de comunicação, juntamente com o uso de redes sociais como propaganda, minou a credibilidade dos meios tradicionais. O texto argumenta que os meios alternativos devem se adaptar para combater a desinformação e promover uma compreensão crítica das narrativas midiáticas, incentivando uma análise mais profunda e consciente das informações consumidas.

Palavras-chave:

Alfabetização midiática, Desinformação, Notícias falsas, Meios alternativos, Democratização dos meios

1. Introduction

The population informed by traditional media has decreased considerably since access to the Internet, and self-publishing has become democratized. Digital natives have begun to have more influence in society and outnumber digital migrants, so traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television have given way to alternative media. Faced with this change in the information biosphere, disinformation, official narratives, and propaganda have found fertile ground to expand their influence by creating hundreds of digital channels aimed at specific audiences from what is known as bot farms in which the same message is repeated until it becomes a truth. The credibility of traditional media has fallen in the face of conspiracy theories, attacks on journalists, the exaltation of influencers, and disqualification from those in power, in addition to the lack of attachment to good communication and journalism practices that have been sacrificed in pursuit of the immediacy demanded by the market. Alternative media must reach this biosphere to confront disinformation, achieve credibility, and offer forms of literacy beyond data verification, such as explaining information, fallacies, and biases and identifying actors and the consequences they bring with them.

2. Democratization of the media and misinformation

Although the Internet was born long before the turn of the millennium, it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that traditional media began to see the new means of transmitting information as an opportunity. Traditional print media that ventured into the Internet between 1996 and 2005 fell into what is known in marketing as cannibalism, as they offered for free the exact product they sold in print since they lacked a business and communication strategy (Mensing, 2007).

The lack of strategy, little knowledge of the initial difficulty of having a website, and costly content managers for the pages meant that only large media could invest in having their website, which was often a digital version of their product.

Beginning in 2000, open-source CMS (Content Management Systems) and frameworks appeared, which were libraries of pre-written code to facilitate the programming of websites. Some popular PHP frameworks were Zend, OpenCMS, PHP-Nuke, Mambo, WordPress, Drupal, Plone, and Joomla. In 2003, the first CMS appeared that did not require coding experience but was based on graphical environments with ready-to-use templates such as the improved version of WordPress or Squarespace, and three years later, Weebly and Wix (Contentstack, 2023).

In Mexico, although there were news sites on the Internet such as Mexis, which evolved into To2.com, Umbral Global, which received content from CBS, or Diariointernet, it was not until 2010 that specialized news sites appeared, such as the website Animal Político, which began as a Twitter account: Pájaro Político (PRODU, 1999).

Since then, alternative media such as Sin Embargo appeared in 2011 and Aristegui Noticias in the same year, giving rise to a wave of new media that only operated on the Internet and through the most popular social networks of the moment: Twitter and Facebook. These sites were news, journalistic and independent (García, 1999). In early 2006, a blog dedicated to promoting the then-presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador appeared, titled El Sendero del Peje, which by 2011 became a news media outlet, with a bias, that of openly highlighting the figure of the character who gave it its name (Islas, 2008).

Since the reduction of the digital divide, greater access to the Internet, and the appearance of smartphones, more media has appeared, and spaces in digital social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have given information spaces to individuals. These people do not have journalism studies, nor are they professionals in this field, which led to established media, with

editorial lines and good practices, competing and sacrificing the verification of sources, confirmed information, and interviews with experts for rumors, information without a source, as well as falling into hoaxes or fake news for the sake of the immediacy of the new market and the latest information biosphere.

The ease of publishing and sharing has given way to disinformation, as users are not in the habit of questioning or verifying the sources of the information they see. Still, they only give credibility to media outlets because they appear to be such (Wardle, 2018).

3. Types of disinformation

It is necessary to understand that not all disinformation and fake news are spread the same way; their reach does not increase maliciously in all cases. There are at least three types of disinformation. In Spanish, the term disinformation is the only one used. Still, in English, there are at least three categories: 1) misinformation: this is the spread of false information that is spread in good faith without the intention of causing harm, such as a supposed cure for cancer, health advice, diets, or miracle products; 2) misinformation: this is accurate information used for harmful purposes, such as a person's health status, personal data such as a telephone number, financial statements, salaries, or properties; and 3) disinformation is Deliberately false information that is disseminated with the purpose of deceiving or causing harm (Government of Canada, 2024).

The post-truth phenomenon also greatly influences today's society, and in 2016, it was nominated as the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries. It refers to situations in which objective facts have less impact on the formation of public opinion than appealing to personal emotions and beliefs. The prefix "post" does not seek to indicate a temporary sense that something has been left behind but rather to highlight that the truth is irrelevant (Del Luján Flores, 2019).

4. The public and its preferences

Currently, the public is divided, among others, into digital natives and digital migrants. The main difference between digital natives (those born in the digital age) and digital migrants (those who have adopted technology later in life) is centered on their familiarity and comfort with digital technologies and the credibility they grant to the media transmitted through these

means.

Digital natives report a shorter concentration time than digital migrants, prioritizing the speed with which they can access and "read" information rather than its quality. Digital migrants, in contrast, tend to prefer to consume more in-depth and detailed content and may be more critical of the reliability of sources (Salas Delgado, 2020).

Digital natives are beginning to dominate news spaces, and their news consumption habits lead them to get information from social networks such as FB, Instagram, and, recently, TikTok. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center in August 2024 indicates that 48% of TikTok users between 18 and 29 years old use the platform to consume news or get political information. While 41% of people between 30 and 49 years old use it for the same purpose (McClain, 2024). Facebook users also report using the platform to get information, although to a lesser extent, 37% (Shearer et al., 2024). Another survey found that 70% of Twitter users rely on the platform for live events or breaking news (Mitchell et al., 2021).

This phenomenon has been exploited by governments, political parties, and in general by entities that seek to spread disinformation for political or propaganda purposes using bot farms, and more recently, bots powered by Artificial Intelligence, social media accounts that are automated so as not to need a person to like, share or publish information on the different platforms and that contribute to undermining politics and democratic processes (Melanson Ricciardone, 2024).

5. The role of alternative media

They emerge as key players in tackling disinformation and restoring credibility (Joux, 2022). By offering innovative approaches beyond simple fact-checking, these media can educate audiences on the importance of critically analyzing information, identifying biases, and recognizing manipulation strategies used in the digital sphere. Their ability to adapt to the new dynamics of information consumption, especially among digital natives, makes alternative media fundamental in constructing a more informed and resilient society in the face of official narratives and propaganda. Their role is relevant and urgent in this context, as they decisively contribute to shaping the future of information and democracy (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021).

Some alternative media are achieving adequate media literacy, so it is essential to highlight initiatives that promote the critical participation of audiences and encourage analytical

thinking in the face of the information they consume. They have begun offering online educational resources and workshops that teach users to recognize disinformation and bias, evaluate sources' credibility, and understand how media narratives are constructed. Training programs for journalists and citizens in critical news analysis are needed, helping them to identify media manipulation techniques and strategies to combat them effectively. This educational work is crucial to foster a culture of more responsible and conscious information consumption, especially among digital natives, who often consume news through social platforms where disinformation is more prevalent (Wardle, 2018).

The effectiveness of these efforts lies in their ability to actively engage digital communities in defending the veracity and integrity of information, turning passive consumers into critical actors within the information biosphere (Graves, 2018).

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