

# Protecting or Empowering: News Literacy Education in the Midst of the Post-Truth Debate

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## Abstract

At first, research concerning young's relationship with the media was more focused on the dangers and distresses, than on the benefits that technology would offer to young people. However, after a while, an important shift occurred in the way how some researchers were framing their studies, focusing more on the opportunities posed by the use of the Internet by young people.

In the light of the debate about the influence of (what some label as) fake news, particularly during the Brexit referendum and the presidential 2016 U.S. election trail, the discussion between risks and opportunities in media education is again pertinent. Some authors have sustained media literacy importance as a tool to react against the misinformation spread (Leetaru, 2016; McGivney, Kasten, Haugh, & DeVito, 2017), while others have been cautioning against a possible backlash effect (boyd, 2017; Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Following Mihailidis and Viotty's (2017) suggestion for the need to reposition news literacy in the post-truth debate, this essay looks into the literature and proposes that news literacy education should be providing means of protection while also providing means of empowerment. Additionally, this essay concludes that scholars and educators should consider positioning news literacy education in relation with human rights, humanism and global education.

**Keywords:** News media literacy, media education, human rights, risks and opportunities

There was a time when research concerning young's relationship with the media was more technophobe. Scholars were more focused on the dangers and distresses than on the benefits that the technology would offer to young people. Accordingly, media literacy interventions were, then, designed to protect individuals from the harmful effects of the media. In particular, in the 1980's, education about the media was mostly designed to protect youngsters from negative content of television (Gutiérrez & Tyner, 2012: 441). Then, with the generalization of the Internet use, research about young people and the media, at first, often focused more on concerns about cyberbullying, sexual predators, and so on.

When media literacy is positioned under a protectionist perspective, it is assumed that people need protection from something that is harmful and more powerful than them. In a time that individuals would only act as an audience, what they could do to change the agenda was somehow more limited. So, in a way, it is understandable that many media educative interventions had that protectionist tone. However, as the media landscape changed to give more participatory initiative to the audience, new opportunities arose.

Around 2006 and 2008 there was an important shift in how some researchers started to frame their studies about young people and the media. Around that time, new studies come up exacerbating the virtues of the media use among young people (Bennett, 2008; Ito, 2010; Watkins, 2009). Likewise, when the scholarly debate started to evolve from a panicking view to a more positive one, media literacy interventions started to assume a more empowering tone instead of just a protectionist one. This was a little before the Arab Spring which started in Tunisia, 2010, and that also brought a new light of hope to the positive potential of technology use. Some might argue that, in some cases, this shift in the perspective about technology went a little too far, incorporating a utopian or 'technoforia' view. However, these studies made an important contribute recognizing that youth is not a homogeneous mass (Bennett, 2008; boyd, 2014) and that the uses which young people do of the Internet can be very diverse (Ito, 2010; Watkins, 2009).

Technology is part of young people's lives. They spend a big portion of their time connected to it (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014), like adults also do. What authors like Ito, Watkins or Bennett have in common is their understanding of how being connected all the time may not necessarily be a bad thing in itself. In the end, it all comes down to the uses that individuals are making, or not making, of the Internet. And that is where media education can play an important role in broadening the views that young people have about the media, empowering them and possibly bridging down the gaps in between. So, the affordances and constraints of media use may differ among young people. While media exposure and participation may increase the risks, media education could pass along certain competences that would protect and empower young people from such risks.

This was also, more or less about the same time, when the term news literacy started to be more widely used in the scholarly research. Although the idea of news literacy was not new, the generalized use of the term was. Much of what has been written about the debate between protecting and empowering perspectives in media education in general could be extended to the realm of news literacy, in particular; yet, with some nuances.

In fact, the concept of news literacy in itself already incorporates an empowering view. News literacy is often defined as the set of competences which allow people to better assess, evaluate and produce the news and which empowers citizens' participation in a democratic society. Malik, Cortesi and Gasser (2013), for example, state that there are five elements in a news literacy definition, those being: knowledge about the role of news, about the motivation to seek out news, about where to access news, about how to evaluate news, and about how to create news (Malik et al., 2013). This last element, about news production, is deeply related with the notion of a participatory audience who can be empowered with a voice. In fact, the authors are very clear about this empowering dimension of news literacy: "What, then, do we want to achieve with 'news literacy'? We want to achieve empowered citizens" (Malik et al., 2013: 8).

While acknowledging how news literacy is built under the umbrella construct of media literacy and in relation to other boroughs like civic education and journalism, Mihailidis (2012) also stresses this empowering dimension of news literacy in a global level: "News literacy acknowledges that in changing news environments, students of all ages need to learn about news not only through established practices and venues, but also as content pertains to new modes of voice, expression and perspective on a global scale" (Paul Mihailidis, 2012: 1).

In the field of media education, scholars have been debating the weight that protectionism versus empowering perspectives should play for quite some time now. Some researchers argue that the move from protecting to empowering approaches raises some questions. For example, in 2009, Buckingham was cautioning about that move, especially in the political discourse.

"In a deregulated, market-driven economy, the argument goes, people need to be responsible for their own behaviour as consumers. Rather than looking to the government to protect them from the negative aspects of market forces, they need to learn to protect themselves. (...) It reflects a shift from public regulation to individual self-regulation that we can see in many other areas of modern social policy.

Of course, this comes packaged as a democratic move—a move away from protectionism and towards empowerment. But it is also an individualising move: it seems to be based on a view of media literacy as a personal attribute, rather than as a social practice. Indeed, it could be seen to place a burden on individuals that they might not necessarily be disposed or able to cope with

And while it gives people responsibilities, it does not also extend their rights: it positions them as consumers rather than as citizens” (Buckingham, 2009: 16-17)

Another interesting point brought by Buckingham to the debate is this view about the relationship between responsibilities and rights; consumers and citizens; as well as empowerment and protection.

About the same time, while assessing young Europeans’ uses of the Internet, Livingston and Haddon advocated a more balanced approach to media education, one where “risks and opportunities must be addressed together” (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009: 25).

However, two year later, in 2011, Hobbs was pointing out that media literacy is also not only about protectionism:

“Those who position media literacy education simply as an antidote to mass media exposure may be blinded inadvertently to the wider range of aims of media literacy education, thus missing out on important evidence and information that contributes to the development of digital and media literacy both in the United States and around the world.” (Hobbs, 2011: 421)

If the debate about protectionist and empowering approaches to media education is not new, why talk about it again? Today, in the light of the discussion about the influence of (what is commonly labeled as) fake news in political campaigns, particularly during the Brexit referendum in the UK and the presidential 2016 U.S. election trail, the idea of media and news literacy as an antidote arose again. Some authors have sustained that several domains of media literacy could act as an important tool to react against the misin-

formation spread (Leetaru, 2016; McGivney, Kasten, Haugh, & DeVito, 2017), while others have been cautioning against a possible backlash where doubt has become a tool (boyd, 2017, 2018) and urging for the need to repositioning media and news literacy in this “era of partisanship and distrust” (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017; Paul Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017: 441).

Thus, if we do not want media education to have the opposite effect of the intended one, raising cynicism (P. Mihailidis, 2008), for example; then, it is important to reflect, once again, about the borders between protectionism and empowering tones, specifically, in news media education.

I would argue that people cannot really become empowered if they do not understand how information is produced and how information is assimilated. Let’s imagine a scenery of war, for instances, one where opponents are moving their armies forward. They usually proceed to attack, while also looking back and thinking about their own defenses. Now, let’s take the sexual education example. Usually, educators provide some sort of knowledge about biology, STD’s, pregnancies, birth control and condom use. Or they may even advocate for total abstinence. In any case, educators offer a protecting advice in order to empower young people about their own choices and behaviors.

In media education, we do not want to scare young people about the media in a way that they build up cynicism and news avoidance, but we also should not be naives to advocate only for an empowering approach. How can people really become empowered about their media experience, if they do not have the critical thinking which allows them to also protect themselves from being manipulated, for example?

This equilibrium between protecting and empowering approaches is particularly relevant in a time when young people act not only as news consumers, but also as sharers and producers, while belonging to a larger society, where, hopefully, one day, they will act as citizens. Jenkins suggests that we need control at an individual level to have power at a collective level (Andersen, 2017). Livingston et al. (2009) also advocated that balance between risks and opportunities.

Hence, in this essay—following Mihailidis and Viotty’s (2017) suggestion for the need to reposition news literacy—I would argue that, in the future, news literacy should be designed with such equilibrium that

it provides both means of protection and means of empowerment. Accordingly, I would suggest that this dichotomy view, expressed so far, should be replaced by a more holistic approach in which protection and empowerment come together in a *continuum* where they may, and should, coexist simultaneously. Thus, a first conclusion of this essay is that **media education needs the right equilibrium between protectionist and empowering approaches.**

But there are other aspects to consider while applying that holistic approach. Although, generally speaking, I would advocate for equilibrium between protectionism and empowering tones in news media literacy interventions, I would also add that interventions should be designed with the context of the participants in consideration. Young people are not a homogeneous mass (Bennett, 2008; boyd, 2014) and their starting point should be taken into consideration when scaling the weight given to each dimension in an intervention. Different young people may need different levels of protection/empowerment. Also, the same perspective of media education may have a different impact according to young people's prior experience and competences about the media. Hence, it may be useful for a media educator to do a preliminary assessment of the participants and adapt the program to their needs.

Building up on boyd's (2017) suggestion for "humanity" and on Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) call for a "caring" dimension in media literacy, my second conclusion would be that **news literacy education should be presented in connectedness with an ethical dimension, where humanism, human rights and global education are incorporated too.** The weight given to protecting or empowering perspectives in news literacy education should always take into consideration that fundamental ethical dimension. After all, the final goal—of educating about how to access, evaluate and produce news—should be to create better citizens and a more harmonized society. ✨

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