

Young People's Engagement with News: Media Literacy and Representations Through Vlogging

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Abstract. This paper explores the intricate connection between media and citizenship, particularly focusing on the younger generation's deep involvement with digital media platforms. The concept of media literacy is examined as a potential solution to the challenges of engaging youth with news and mitigating the spread of fake news. The paper highlights the limitations of traditional media literacy approaches in addressing contemporary media issues and suggests new strategies to enhance media literacy among young people.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Representations; Fake News; Vlogs.

1. Introduction

The transmission of information through the media not only influences on the living habitats of people but also changes the way that people think. Today, as new technologies continue to develop, people are becoming increasingly used to receiving information and interacting with others using novel media platforms. Mihailidis (2014) explored how the relationship between media and citizenship is becoming a form of codependency, which relies on that media has increasingly important functions. An increasing number of people are spending time online, in particular young people who were born in a generation with ready access to online media. They are referred to as “digital natives” by Prensky, as well as “all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001, p.1). For this reason, they are more likely to be able to acquire a stronger sense of digital and media literacy. Buckingham (2005) discussed “the media literacy of children and youth” with other researchers in Ofcom, an independent regulator that observes people’s understanding of communication technologies and online life in the United Kingdom. He agreed with many researchers and media producers that children today are more media literate than the children of previous generations, even though they did not learn how to use media technologies systematically (Buckingham,2005, p.6).

Today’s young generation, especially those aged between 16-18 years old (the focus group of my research), are faced with a significant amount of complex and often polarizing information on the internet. While secondary school students have received education on media literacy and have been taught to think somewhat critically about the news, it has still not been enough to solve contemporary media issues such as “fake news”. Buckingham (2017) addressed this question in a recent article on his blog, claiming that some researchers inferred that most young people were unable to distinguish between real and fake news. Most interestingly, Buckingham could not understand why this argument applied only to young people. Although adults are also easily tempted by fake news, young people are by nature more susceptible as they do not possess the knowledge or power required to effectively resist fake news. This suggests media literacy is a good but insufficient solution to the problems in today’s media. It is therefore time for us to carefully think about how to encourage young people to critically engage with news media.

There are several arguments about and research into young people’s engagement with media, specifically with news media and news resources on social media platforms. Despite the fact that young people would like to update their social media, they seem more interested in socializing and leisure pursuits using social media platforms (Mihailidis, 2014, p.1060). Mindich (2005) has argued that students and young people are less interested in news and they are the lowest on the totem pole

of newspaper readership, television watchers and other media consumers for news purposes. Researchers seem to believe that children and young people are uninterested with news primarily because most global current affairs news are hard to read and inaccessible. Moreover, it is because they are judged as being incapable of fully grasping how the news relates to and impacts on their daily life. As increasingly innovative mobile devices are created, the wall of information transmission between news media and school children is breaking down. Today, instead of simply releasing conventional written forms of news, media institutions are releasing news through multiple means, such as video, radio and databases, on a multitude of platforms. Therefore, people are also beginning to seek platforms that contain a wider variety of online news resources. Increasingly, people are getting more information through social media, up from 44% to 49% from 2018 to 2019 in UK (Ofcom, 2019, p.1). Use of the internet for news occupied 83% for those aged between 16-24, while the internet is the most-used platform for news consumption within this age group (Ofcom, 2019, p.15). From recent data, we can clearly see that young people are seeking information that includes different voices, rich and varied content, and shareable resources on social media platforms rather than merely expressing an interest in news. The challenge facing media institutions is how to create news that is easily accessible and interesting for today's youth.

In this paper, the benefits and limitations of media literacy as a means to enhance young people's engagement with the news will be examined. Subsequently, the emergence of journalistic vlogs as a novel form of news media representation for today's youth will be explored. Finally, an investigation will be conducted into how professional reporters can foster greater interest among young individuals in formal and pertinent news through the medium of vlogs.

2. Media Literacy in the Digital Age

The media plays an increasingly complex and yet subtle role in our lives. It satisfies people's curiosity, gives the public easier access to information and knowledge, and enables us to hear more voices. Recent research has shown that there is a big picture emerging about the dimensions of media literacy, which includes the ability to critically interact and comprehensively think about the information that people watch, listen and receive from online networks. Ofcom defined media literacy as the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts (Buckingham, 2006, p.6-24), this represents a solid policy commitment relating to the importance of media literacy. Hobbs illustrated the process model of digital and media literacy through five competencies: Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect and Act (Hobbs, 2011, p.11-12). More recent research by Burn and Durran (2017) defined media literacy as cultural, critical and creative. Media literacy as cultural encourages people to consider online information and content based on a wide range of historical dimensions and cultural backgrounds. Swiggum (2008) also discussed about being critical in media literacy, claiming that digital citizens should be well-informed within their ability to evaluate and analyze what they see. For most people, being creative, interpreting media texts and positively imagining and creating a related or even new representative work based on their own understanding, is a challenging task. Since the first "Star wars" film was released, it has become one of the largest forms of intellectual property in the world and has become the ultimate representation of popular culture. A quick search on Youtube yields thousands of re-edited and creative videos published by fans and audiences. This phenomenon is also related to participatory culture, which was noted by Jenkins (2009), where audiences become producers. Differently, media literacy is more inclined to focus on individual expression rather than community involvement (Jenkins, 2009, p.7).

Notions of media literacy have been adopted since the last century, thus a copious number of arguments about it have been written. In online space, the lines between news and entertainment, facts and fiction, truth and hearsay are less distinguishable (Mihailidis, 2014, p.1). Theoretically, people should be trained and educated to access online spaces, in particular, young citizens who are less able to distinguish between these types of information. Unfortunately, the disconnect between ideal and real is pervasive in so many schools and countries. Students need to be given more education when entering the new knowledge culture (Jenkins, 2006, p.183).

Mihailidis (2014) argued that it could be hard for people to harness the true participatory nature of the web without actively learning how to be an active participant and how to enhance community communications. This is partly how cyberbullying occurs and goes unchecked, when netizens do not realize that their comments, likes and shares can have palpable ripple effects. A metaphor was proposed by Hobbs (2011), who considered media literacy as part of a constellation of stars within the universe. As there are so many stars, with each reflecting different skills and habits of mind, she stated educators have a tendency to always focus on one or several parts (Hobbs, 2011, p.12). However, if educators think about and teach media literacy merely as a way of obtaining greater online capabilities, researchers digging for deep connections between the media and the public may end up a redundant effort. To Burn and Durran (2017), “media literacy is not simply (or not only) a metaphor”. They explored the connections between print literacy and the way people engage with the media through a three-part structure: institution, text, audience (Burn and Durran, 2017, p.3). Media texts are becoming a particular form of language used to represent the world. The texts act as a bridge of communication between institutions and people.

Media literacy should be more about people who engage with digital platforms. It has come to mean different things for different people, whether they are policy makers, educators, media industries, etc. (Burn and Durran, 2017, p.4). Media literacy should be cautious not to get trapped within the confines of technocracy, particularly if people remain focused more on the implication of digital tools instead of the potential connections and engagement between people and tools (Gordon, 2013, p.15-34).

3. The Impact of Media Literacy on Youth

We are in an environment where young people are spending more and more time on media platforms, where electronic devices are becoming more popular in the classroom, where everyone is speaking more freely online. However, teenagers may not be aware of the possible negative impact of mass media. Meanwhile their thoughts, opinions, behaviour, and worldview continue to be influenced by information around them. One of the more discernible problems for the youth’s engagement with the news in media literacy, is learning how to deal with “fake news”. According to Mihailidis (2014), social media enables bonding and bridging social capital for young people. The spaces provided by these platforms offer them a comfort zone in which they can make judgements feeling more “free” instead of “critical”. Fake news or one-sided opinions spread by circles of friends may cloud judgments, even rendering people unable to distinguish between media and real life, blindly and uncritically following in the trends around them.

Technology might be a solution to help people identify fake news, through methods such as opening white lists and establishing an automatic fact-checker on websites (Buckingham, 2017). After the American general election in 2016, Mark Zuckerberg posted a statement, where he claimed they were dedicated to stopping the spread of misinformation and fake news on Facebook (BBC, 2016). Twitter, Google and other social media platforms have also expressed their desire to reduce fake news, misinformation, and harassment on the internet. With so many complex commercial relations operating behind media industries (Buckingham, 2017), they have been portrayed as almost like “dogs with bones” (Wallace, 2012, p.12). We cannot just rely on the consciousness of media companies, young people need to be informed about the dangers of misinformation.

The UK government recently updated the Online Harms White Paper, a guidance to make people feel safer and more confident online (Online Harms White Paper, 2019). “The increasing official recognition of media education by policy makers and the growing enthusiasm of teachers and students in many countries would seem to suggest that media education’s time has finally arrived” (Buckingham, 1998, p.41).

A study aimed at helping students deal with misinformation and fake news online was launched by researchers at Stanford university and was piloted by teachers in several high schools in 2015 in the US (Chris Berdik, 2016). The study was part of “Civic Online Reasoning,” which is a series of activities designed for people to practice and develop their media literacy. They questioned whether

or not high-school students check the authenticity of an alarming image posted on Facebook. Another question was, ‘do many students chase the sources of controversial claims?’ After they field-tested and analysed the data, researchers reported that the answer in each case was no in principle. The report concluded that “young people’s ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak” (Chris Berdik, 2016).

Therefore, the cultivation of media literacy is a difficult and urgent task. While we enjoy the convenience and pleasures of the media, we need to face the other side of the coin and learn how to deal with the negative impacts of the media. The existence of media literacy education can enable teenagers to explore the wider world of the media. In the process of receiving different information and reorganising their thoughts, teenagers can gradually reflect on their ways and means of media use, so as to become more qualified internet citizens with more rational thinking. Media literacy education should be a right and responsibility, with comprehensive support from pre-school to university level, and within adult education (Kerr, 2004) .

A study evaluating the implications of Media Literacy Education (MLE) was carried out, by analyzing the Primary School curriculum terms of MLE comparatively in Turkey, Ireland and Finland (Tanriverdi and Özlem Apak, 2010, p.1187-1213). Although these countries have different education systems and different ways of integrating media literacy competencies in their media education of teenagers, both realized that a consciousness of mass media is very important for children. In Finland, media education is accepted as an important part of the educational system (Lundvall, 2009; p.13). In the study, Tanriverdi and Özlem Apak discovered several effects of ML courses, such as how “to become a responsible communicator and media literate person”, “to learn media critique and to define ethical and aesthetic values in communication”, “and to learn to affect participation, interaction and communication” (Tanriverdi and Özlem Apak, 2010, p.1187-1213).

4. Youth Engagement with News

Although more adult citizens, policy-makers and media educators keep their eyes on media literacy, students seem indifferent towards the influences of news, media and communication. Many young people are careless and apathetic in a digital media world where they can say what they want to say, watch the things they want to watch and circumvent the things they are not interested in, although they still cannot avoid a lot of the schoolwork that they dislike.

On the one hand, it may be said that young people are indeed naturally less interested in the news. The Flamingo’s recent study shows that young people are less likely to go directly to news apps and websites (Flamingo, Reuters Institute, 2019). They are not really keen to watch news about government policy, international relations, and business affairs (Mindich, 2005). Yet some studies present a juxtaposing viewpoint, suggesting that the youth have an interest in current events, but find conventional media platforms boring (Livingstone, 2002; Raeymaeckers, 2004), unsharable with friends immediately, difficult to understand (Raeymaeckers, 2004), and irrelevant to their lives (Buckingham, 1999). That explains why there is a rising number of searches on the internet for news among those aged between 16-24 (83%) (Ofcom,2019). Young people expressing needs for integrated spaces and novel forms of news presentation offers new opportunities for the field of journalism to create more attractive and creative productions. Using the medium of vlogs as a way of engaging young people with news media may prove to be a highly effective method. This will be discussed later in this paper.

On the other hand, with regard to the report explored by the Stanford University, young people are not cautious or sensible enough with news and information online (Chris Berdik, 2016). Media educators and media institutes need to gradually enable young people, in the face of the media, to have the ability to choose, understand, question, evaluate, create, produce and have the ability to respond intelligently. In Flamingo’s research they interviewed some young people talking about “fake news” (Flamingo, Reuters Institute, 2019):

Ellie(aged 18-20) said most places that she follows are quite established, which are more trustworthy.

While some young people actively try to avoid being influenced by fake news, concerns about their ability to genuinely spot fake news remain well grounded.

Ryan(aged 18-20) said the term “fake news”; I have tried my hardest not to fully ignore the topic.

5. Fake News

“Fake news” is a term that identifies online information that is intentionally false and provocative (Thomas, 2018, p.7). Fake news often has a political dimension and sometimes may have a primarily economic motivation to attract people to click the commercial link called “clickbait” (Buckingham, 2017).

Recent news about the Chinese coronavirus has overwhelmed many. Such special and uncommon circumstances have inevitably lead to a sharp increase in the flow of news information. Meanwhile, the spread of fake news has also proliferated inside and outside of China as a result of recent events. MIT study presented data that false news is 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories, with truth traveling six times slower than falsehood (Bhaskar Chakravorti, 2020). Within China, a lot of unverified fake news and misinformation is constantly being circulated on social media through platforms such as Wechat, Weibo, Tiktok, etc. Many retweeted articles with attractive, sensationalist titles, such as: “the 2019-ncov can be cured with these three simple ways of life”, “the doctor says drinking garlic water every day can prevent 2019-ncov pneumonia”, “Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Hangzhou all want to close the city” and so on. Outside China, after the 2016 US presidential election Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and many social media platforms once again became a “destroyed area” because of the spread of fake news. This is a problem as old as dial-up modems but is now supercharged by social media and partisan news bubbles (Chris Berdik, 2016).

6. Buckingham: Is Media Literacy the Answer for Fake News?

As discussed earlier, Buckingham (2017) argued that media literacy is engendering a spirit of ‘solutionism’, and that people are inclined to regard ML as an individual problem when policymakers find they are unable to regulate news media. Although Burn & Durran (2017) concluded that “media literacy is a useful general shorthand for a complex set of phenomena” It is not an excuse for policy-makers, educators, media institutions and other related characters to avoid responsibility.

When media literacy was first proposed it was seen as a solution to tackle the various problems mentioned in this paper. Over time, media literacy was gradually reduced to what Ofcom’s head of media literacy, Robin Blake, referred to as “internet safety and getting grannies online” (Wallis & Buckingham, 2103). Any extended educational conception of media literacy ultimately gave way to a much more reductive, functional notion of technological skill; and to the need to be seen to be ‘doing something’ about online safety” (Wallis & Buckingham, 2103). Duncan also argued that (2001) media literacy cannot be just a safeguard wall and should not only be approached from a protectionist point of view. If media literacy is not a fully convincing solution for dealing with fake news, rather than continuing to pretend that students are able to avoid misinformation and fake news themselves, media literacy should ask, how else can we make today’s youth more critical about what they see online? The sources of fake news push forward their own agendas, seeking either to acquire profit or further their influence. “The problem is not fake news but a digital capitalism that makes it profitable to produce false but click-worthy stories” (Evgeny Morozov, 2017). So there is no other choice, unless government and media companies could break the current situation. Educators and researchers need to introspect into what constitutes helpful engagement with young people and how they connect what students learn in the classroom with their conduct outside the classroom.

An interesting piece of research used a fake news game to test a total of 95 secondary school students between the ages of 16 and 19 in the Netherlands (Jon Roozenbeek & Sander van der Linden, 2019).

The research separated participants into two groups, a ‘treatment group’ and a ‘control group’. Researchers used inoculation theory as an approach to preventing the spread of fake news, akin to inoculating a virus to prevent its spread. Firstly, the treatment group played a game related to an article (fake news) that they will be asked to make judgements about after 30 minutes. Meanwhile the control group watched a presentation that had no connection to the article, and were then asked to judge the same article. The results is similar to the hypothesis of researchers. “The treatment group rated the article’s reliability significantly lower than the control group” (Jon Roozenbeek & Sander van der Linden, 2019). This experiment shows that actively inoculating people can have an effect on how reliable people perceive fake news to be. By actively inoculating, it may be possible to increase people's awareness to whether or not they are reading fake news. These researchers showed that people who actively engaged with similar material beforehand were more likely to question its reliability. Whereas those who had not actively engaged were less likely to question the reliability of the information. The researchers did note that the information gathered is “preliminary”, meaning it is still within its early stages. More investigations are required to substantiate this theory. This is evidence that media educators need to start rethinking the way that media literacy is taught. In this context, media literacy needs to be linked to wider campaigns for media reform (Buckingham, 2017). The creation of fake news and its commercial and political incentives within the larger media landscape are critical points of information that should be taught more rigorously. As Laura Spinney (2017) argued, “if you understand the nature of the false information, you can target it for suppression.”

7. Media as a Medium of Representation

Finally, there is another solution to tackling fake news that was proposed by Buckingham (2018). He argued there should be more professional journalists who adopt a positive attitude and sense of curiosity to question any evidence at their disposal in the process of media production. Journalism produces news as a type of consumption for audiences, along with the meanings that journalists want to transmit. In a certain sense, the public can only see the world after the media has translated it (Buckingham, 2018). In this case, the concept of representation should be considered as a way in which media and citizens conduct and interpret meanings of information.

“Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (Hall, 2013). Hall uses the concept of representation to discuss the source of cultural meaning and believes that objects have no meaning on their own. Meaning is produced and constructed through language and other cultural symbols that operate in a linguistic way (Hall, 1997; 2013).

Media as a medium to transmit messages in our life, is not a direct presentation of world rather it is a representation of the world (Buckingham, 2014). Simplified language and media can be made into analogies, they are both semiotic systems used by people to construct meanings. Every cultural practice creates a semiotic system to some extent and what we need to understand is how exactly to create meanings (Saussure,1960; Hall, 2013). Hall (2013) mentioned three approaches to representation: the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist. However, both the reflective and intentional theories are seen as flawed by most contemporary scholars, affirming the significance of constructionist approach (Rettberg, 2017).

How does the media construct meaning through their own language, which can be presented by texts, visual images and other objects? Hall (2013) proposed that language is a system of representation in the overall process of constructing meaning. The language could take the form of sound, word, image or object, functioning as a sign. Media producers make choices about what to include and exclude, and how to represent using their own language. Similarly, when people tweet or post on social media, they represent themselves using their own language, as Rettberg (2017) argued, this represents “a certain aspect of ourselves, a certain way of seeing ourselves”.

On one side, the concept of representation contains some harsh realities about news to citizens because it requires them to know about certain complexities in how news is constructed with purpose

and meaning. On the other side, it is a counterforce for media industries to push themselves into creating more authentic, creative and unaffected news production.

8. Video-blogs (Vlogs) : News for Young People

Un-professional news reporters

As the coronavirus (Covid-19) ensued, the city of Wuhan was placed under lockdown. In these special circumstances, reporting on the situation within the city became an onerous mission. In light of this, the public have become reporters, recording and narrating about the conditions in Wuhan. They adopted the unique and innovative media technique of videoblogging, or “vlogging”.

Rob Kellett is a professional rollerblader from Brisbane. Before being isolated back home in Australia, he filmed himself and his friend rollerblading on an empty street in Wuhan (Zoe Zaczek, 2020). This is not a lone example. Searching “Wuhan”, “coronavirus” and other related key words on Youtube, showed that there are a lot of vlogs updated by users and even some professional institutions. One of the most popular ones has 8,277,835 views on Channel 4 News.

This is a useful development for news production, not only for these special circumstances, but also for commercial media activities. Visual signs bear an important role and resemblance to things to which they represent. This shows the meaning of signs more directly and also it reduces the likelihood of them being misinterpreted (Hall, 2013). Vlogs act as a form of video narrative where the vlogger holds the camera and talks to audiences, allowing audiences to gain a stronger sense of the real world in a more personal way. Using first perspective to express news and record real interaction with some emergencies is a way for audience to feel participating and trust. Why young people like the vlog news because it is easy for them to understand and this interested expression is more like the way how the young people talk. When people could find the representation, they are trust in and also it represents more close to themselves, they are inclining to support (Buckingham, 2018).

Professional news reporters

In China, since 2019, China Daily has frequently used vlogging to report news. China daily as a Chinese national English-language newspaper took the first step to report “Two sessions” which is a series of political conventions held every year in China using vlogs. The first vlog, which had 39.0k views on their platform, adopted first-perspective to perform how a young journalist report and interview important people in the “Two sessions”. In this video, the reporter is not an objective messenger but is an experienter representing the view of the normal people. It lowers the barriers to serious news for young people and brings a fresh sense of political news.

Although Buckingham (2018) argued that it is possible that vlogs likely to be available for only a tiny minority, they remain an attractive way of getting young people more engaged with the news.

9. Conclusion

The role of media literacy has been discussed at length earlier in this paper. However, at the moment, it is still not a sufficient answer to address problems regarding young people’s engagement with news. If media literacy is not the answer to the proliferation of fake news, news media should be more active and productive in trying to discover more creative and trustworthy ways of reporting news. If the product is not tailored for young people, why would they want to see it? There should be a way of reporting that allows teens to interpret and critically engage information. An interview about young people’s opinions towards news through video sums this up acutely (Flamingo, Reuters Institute, 2019):

Ruby, 18-20, UK

Okay, that’s cool, like a Snapchat story. I think it’s better for young people, so they don’t have to read as much and get confused. It’s really short. It’s not paragraphs. I like that. Then whenever you click you can share it

to social media and that. That's interesting.... You could probably put it on Snapchat as well where we'll get it easier.

News needs to deliver value to young people as individuals, not just for society. It needs to support their desire to progress in life as well as entertain and engage them. Hall (2013) discussed that visual signs and images are still signs which carry meaning and needs to be interpreted. Vlogs, at least, provide news media with a novel way of encouraging young people to engage with news and keep them within the space of interpretation.

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