

TRUTH, FAKE AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM - A MODEL OF VISUAL AND MEDIA LITERACY PEDAGOGY

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Abstract. This paper presents a pedagogical model for academic journalism and mass communication education that is based on visual and media literacy. The work contributes to the discussion of post-truth issues that continue to challenge traditional ways of teaching journalism, media literacy and visual communication in the digital age. The learning model theoretically deconstructs visual information disorder, from new forms of visual text to an examination of economic, ideological and power relations in journalistic products. Its aspect is based on projects for the practical improvement of visual, media and communication skills. The ultimate goal of this pedagogy is to develop students' knowledge and skills so that, for each news story, they are interested in questions relating to the accuracy of sources, patterns of visual communication and ways of conveying meaning.

Keywords: media literacy; visual communication; pedagogy; journalism; critical thinking; digital literacy

Today, in the post-truth era, technological change and media convergence are constantly reconceptualising the meaning of journalism as a profession and the realm of university education in this interdisciplinary and dynamically changing field. The tendency in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in journalism and mass communication over the past 12 years has strengthened the role of universities as an important agency in media capacity building (Deuze 2001). This is reflected, both globally¹ and in Bulgaria², by the steady increase in the number of students over the period 2010 – 2021. Students' choices reflect their conviction that higher education in journalism is important for their professional positioning and development (Cummins, Gotlieb & McLaughlin 2023), despite the widespread decline in enrollments during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also manifested itself in various fields of education. Future journalists rely on the academic training to help them master the theoretical, social, and historical foundations of the profession, while learning what is necessary for their responsible role as communicators of public life in an era of dynamic technological and social transformations.

Undoubtedly, academic education in journalism is more important than ever. The specialized, focused training of future professionals who will have a serious impact on public life, who not only have a command of the theoretical, social, and historical premises of their profession, but are also aware of their responsibility and role in the communication process, is a priority for educational institutions. Recently, the arguments for and against academic journalism education have given way to arguments about what should be taught to future journalists, as communication has undergone significant changes.

Visual journalism has undoubtedly established itself as a serious academic discipline, not just as a postgraduate, practical, and professional training. The reasons are clear – the responsibilities and challenges are growing, and better training is needed to do the job. The people who are involved in this profession are burdened with a responsibility that seems greater than that of other professions.

Simultaneously, the challenges to journalism education are growing. The old debate about theory and practice is being transformed into a search for a workable balance between academic, professional, and applied learning. A debate about whether simulations of real work environments are functional or should be replaced by more motivating programs of engagement with the environment and the world, with professional standards, with the universality of skills. The increasingly informational and algorithmic world of modern digital environments presents journalists with unprecedented challenges. For example, communication processes currently exist and occur simultaneously in both polarities – the thinking and actions of the audience in either its conformist receptive dynamics; or in one of the revolutionary forms, such as the (new) digital habits of participation. Phenomena such as disinformation, filtering and manipulation of information, abuse of media influence, agenda-setting, covert imposition of biased viewpoints and political agendas threaten the stability of democracy and the very nature of the journalistic profession. The right of the public to receive verified, credible and undistorted information makes the discussion on media and communication education important and socially relevant, especially today.

The main objectives of journalism education, according to a UNESCO report, are equally important: to teach students how to identify news and recognize the story in a complex field of facts and opinions; to conduct journalistic research; to write for, illustrate, edit and produce material for the various media formats, and audiences; to become familiar with and practice journalistic ethics and practices, and be at the service of society; to observe media law, and the political economy of the media; to master the coverage of political and social issues; to develop the language skills necessary for the profession³.

In a 2013 report, the organization found a general global trend “towards a better understanding of the conditions” that are a prerequisite for quality journalism education, and noted “significant progress despite the challenges it faces”⁴. The dynamic changes in the post-truth era call for increased attention and development of media literacy education and fostering a critical thinking.

1. The need for visual and media literacy

Journalism students are both future professional communicators in the creation and transmission of meaning, and consumers of media content, much of which they now receive through digital visual media. The development of good media competence and an understanding of the communication conventions for delivering messages is a fundamental part of their professional training (Messaris 1998). At the same time, the scale of communication in the era of “participatory culture”⁵ and “platform society” (Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018) is enormous, driven by the capabilities of Web 2.0⁶ and Web 3.0⁷ technologies. For example, communication by means of visuals, computer-generated printing, and graphic design have become ubiquitous. They have transformed the message of the news and even the printed word into an image in many different ways. As a result of these contemporary phenomena, the ratio of images and video to text in news continues to increase. The daily saturation of visual and media content affects persuasion, attention, information absorption, engagement, and emotional response (Geise & Baden 2014; Graber 1996). Unfortunately, this often makes it difficult to judge the quality or authenticity of content.

The focus of a series of studies over the past decade has expanded the knowledge in the realm of visual communication about the use and characteristics of images, graphic design and elements in iconic 21st-century phenomena such as “misinformation”, “disinformation” and “misinformation”⁸, agenda setting, framing the news message to convey a subjective perspective of economic, ideological and power dependency. One of the main conclusions is that visual images in the media space are directly involved in creating the “information disorder”⁹ identified by Wardle and Derakhshan. This is further exacerbated by the spiralling involvement of the sharing culture, destabilizing the position of traditional *gatekeepers* of information. The stability of democratic society is threatened, and in a changing media environment there is growing distrust and misunderstanding about journalism as a profession.

What is happening in practice today is that the quest for freedom of expression and objectivity in the public interest is not being realized. The easier choice, but not that of the professional journalist, is to self-limit independence by choosing the sources of the material, its sponsorship, where and what advertising is placed alongside it, where the material is published, the images, the graphic design, the layout, the editorial policy, who owns the media servers, etc. Most of these factors affect elements of visual communication and depend on them to effectively convey the importance of the news and the ability to reach the right audience.

New forms of visual text also challenge dominant trends in language and expand existing notions of literacy. They therefore call for a broader pedagogical approach to journalism in the digital age. The semantic and syntactic means of expression of visual communication distinguish its language from other modes of communication

(Moernaut, Mast & Pauwels 2020). Working in synergy with verbal text, images construct the multimodal text of the news story's content and message and are a key tool in influencing the audience's worldview, meaning making, and action.

2. A model of visual and media literacy pedagogy

The specialized training develops skills for more effective communication and provides the necessary mechanisms to meet the challenges of the post-truth era, to preserve the journalistic independence and objectivity, to sift out lies, and to convey the truth correctly and accurately in the public interest. The pedagogical approach is suitable as an elective curriculum for journalism, public relations, advertising, and media design students.

The methodology is a convergent curriculum that develops visual competence in digital and media literacy. It is a convergence of the traditional lecture model and project-based learning through individual digital research and hands-on media production exercises.

Today's digital capabilities allow students not only to practice their skills with individually created news content, to develop their ability to decipher, evaluate, interpret, and create visuals for news media, but also to monitor and learn about audience reactions and behavior in real time. Project-based learning enables the development of journalistic skills such as critical thinking, good writing and listening, narrative construction and adaptation to different situations; the creation of visual media messages as part of the full journalistic process; the ability to analyze and evaluate different visual narratives on the same news story; and knowledge of diversity concepts. A similar approach has already been applied to journalism students, but in different media disciplines (Friesem 2019; Auger, Tanes-Ehle & Gee 2017), with all experiments showing positive theoretical and practical results. These and other studies have also highlighted the benefits of learning by doing, rather than passively listening to lectures, in undergraduate journalism courses (Friesem 2019; Greenberg 2007; De Burgh 2003; Reese & Cohen 2000).

3. A framework of pedagogical methodology

In an era of misinformation and malicious news narratives, the skills required to interpret and evaluate media messages are as important as ever, but also insufficient. At a structural and content level, the proposed pedagogy is based on the Hobbs' training model of the *five digital and media literacies* (Hobbs 2017). The pedagogies of *visual communication* and *media literacy* are integrated in accordance with each of them. The stages of the project-based learning are summarized in Table 1. In this distribution, the three educational methodologies develop practical skills and a sense of visual and media literacy, bringing together media analysis and visual media production.

Hobbs' model of five digital and media literacies (Hobbs 2017) is the basic structure upon which the other two trainings are woven in an interdisciplinary manner. It

provides students with a focused and organized approach to conducting appropriate media analysis and examining expressed biases (those of authors and readers), as identity is fluid in cyberspace. It integrates techniques that bring them full circle in accessing information, analyzing it, creating their own messages, making sense of their own consumption, and exhibiting social responsibility (Hobbs 2017). One of the steps towards developing interpretive, critical skills is to develop knowledge and skills by creating one's own media messages so that the complexities of conveying meaning can be understood and mastered. Simultaneously, the model is an operational strategy for the introduction of ethical and theoretical standards of professional practice (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton & Robison 2009).

Visual communication pedagogy emphasizes the concepts of visual language, grammar, and culture. Its scope includes media theories, narrative design, and communication interactivity using digital and analog techniques (Josephson, Kelly & Smith 2020). Students build a solid foundation in the ability to “*read images*” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006) through practical examples and exercises from the visual arts (Meggs 2012), design fundamentals, computer layout, and media design (Valkanova 2013).

While visual literacy has always involved a form of discursive command of relatively traditional features of nonverbal communication, semiotics and art, it is increasingly concerned with the more modern technological aspects of digital images, web pages and their visual elements, including the layout and presentation of images, video and text (Valkanova 2019). Also, the reader's need for instant access to news, information and the non-linear clicking in the digital space necessitates new formats for presenting news such as the integration of image, text, color, sequence, motion, etc. (Valkanova 2019).

From a communicative point of view, images, graphic layouts and elements are an essential tool for directing attention, for persuading, for complementing or changing the meaning of verbal text, for changing attitudes by influencing an emotional level and for activating peripheral information processing. Visual and media literacy develops not only students' aesthetic sensitivity to the use of images and graphics, but also a critical awareness of the manipulative power of images to influence the way news and information in news stories are translated.

The pedagogy of critical media literacy develops the capacity to expose the distortions, hidden ideologies, and economic power relations of media portrayal and coverage (Kellner and Jeff 2007). It extends the traditional aspect of literacy by relating power and information through an analysis of ideologies and power structures, the dominance of the media message, its authors, and the target audience (Funk, Douglas & Jeff 2016). The focus is on exploring the ways in which media tendentiously position viewers and audiences for reading and communicating meaning (Funk, Douglas & Jeff 2016). From a visual communication perspective, skill-builders in this area include, for example: the authentication of images and videos; the analysis and verification of metadata, copyright, etc.; reverse image search (in search engines, image banks,

etc.); analysis for the presence of manipulation in images and videos; analysis of visual content and social media data; detection of deep fake images and videos; also the authentication of news copy, etc. They are particularly important for detecting and analyzing (visually and verbally) “disinformation” and “malicious information”¹⁰ in the digital media space, such as those listed in the Wardle and Derakhshan report to the European Council¹¹: *fabricated content; impostor content; misleading content; satire or parody; false connection; false context; manipulated content*.

Table 1. Stages of project-based learning, visual and media literacy development, and practical exercises

Stages of the project-based learning	Visual media literacy competencies	Practices
Researching the diversity of perspectives of visual narratives	<i>Access</i>	Determine the nature and value of the visual materials Locating and gaining access to the visual material to be investigated Analyse and evaluate different sources for the same story
Critical review of examples and their use for project sources	<i>Analyze and evaluate</i>	Interpret, analyze, and evaluate the meanings of images Examine the reliability of information and the credibility of data using media literacy
Creation of a well-formulated project on the basis of the research analysis	<i>Design and construct</i>	Design and create meaningful images and visual media in the form of research paper, design and presentation
A review of the work carried out and sharing feedback on the project	<i>Reflect</i>	News release and a critical review of the media consumption Using the gained experience in their future career
Use the project to educate other participants (students and the public) about the authenticity and validity of the news topic and story	<i>Act</i>	Understanding the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues involved in the creation and use of images and visual media; and even creating their own code of ethics for truthfully portraying a news story

4. Conclusion

Journalism is an interdisciplinary field, and the proposed learning model allows students to go beyond the simple focus on verification and authenticity, the so-called media literacy. It broadens the perspective to see the economics, power structures and ideologies behind the media messages expressed through the increasingly dominant visual communication in the digital media space.

The proposed methodology builds professional skills through the practical application of theoretical knowledge in the form of projects, exercises, and discussions. The convergence of lecture-based and problem-based learning in visual and media literacy aims to support the exploration of the reliability, validity, and authenticity of different visual news materials and texts on all contemporary platforms. The production component is of unique value because it trains not only the techniques of delivering the news story, but also the diverse and complex stratifications of context and message construction. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to approach, investigate, interpret, create, evaluate, and act responsibly with relevant media texts in the chaotic information overload in the post-truth era.

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NOTES

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6. Characterized by social media platforms, wikis, blogs, video sharing and podcasting, etc., where technology companies such as Meta, Google, Apple, etc. exert control over user data through their algorithms, determining what information is consumed - from how it is used to where it is stored and processed.
7. It is built on the core concepts of decentralization, openness and greater utility for users, introducing personalized content in news media, bringing artificial intelligence to journalism and blockchain tools to verify content and facts.

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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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