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Not Just for Laughs – Using Comics to Burst the Fake-News Bubble

ABSTRACT

This research study presents an analysis of a pedagogical strategy for teaching university students how to apply critical media literacy skills to develop their ability to detect fake news. The goal of the study was to explore the potential advantages of using comics as medium to engage students, clarify complex content, and accelerate cognition. The empirical part of the paper provides a comprehensive account of this pedagogical strategy, outlining the design and implementation of the workshop, incorporating insights from critical media literacy literature, current examples of fake news, and graphic narrative approaches. In particular, the project engaged the students through the presentation of information about fake news with comic-style graphic narratives and assessed their learning through their interaction and completion of creative dialogue within these narratives. The students showed a high level of engagement and helped peers navigate examples of fake news. They also demonstrated insights into the structural and economic factors that encourage fake news, including within the commercial news media. This study brings new insights and information on several issues related to media literacy practice in the academic context and emphasizes the relationship between communication and pedagogical studies. Adding comics to the critical media literacy toolkit shows promise in expanding techniques in the battle against fake news.

KEY WORDS

1 Introduction

The decline of traditional media and the rise of social media have resulted in an increase in inaccurate and, sometimes, dangerous information. This fake news has economic, political, and social consequences. Citizens need to learn how to filter, and they must become their own educators, editors, and fact checkers to ensure that the information they receive and rely upon is trustworthy. And, they must do so in a fast-changing informational and political environment. Young adults, in particular, need to be educated about the tools and tactics to identify fake news, as they are often at greater risk of exposure than older generations by sheer virtue of their higher use of social media – the main culprit in the spread of fake news. A study revealed that over 50% of responding Internet users in 24 countries use social networks to keep up to date. At the same time, social media is also used for verifying the accuracy of online news with some consumers admitting that they look at how many other people have shared or liked a story to determine whether the content is reliable.[1] While regulation and legislation are part of the solution, experts agree that we must take swift action to inform our leaders of tomorrow about how to seek verification before acting on what might be fake news.

In 2022, in a global survey, the majority of people said that they had recently witnessed false or misleading information about a variety of important topics including COVID-19, politics, immigration, and climate.[2] Citizens in multiple countries report anxiety about fake news and indicate support for government investment in regulating and censoring it.[3] But fake news can also be costly and potentially invasive if government regulation is needed to provide surveillance, policing, and prosecution. A more economical and, arguably, more effective response is for investment in education. Experts suggest that research initiatives should focus on how to motivate young adults to fact check, and how to provide media literacy skills to evaluate information and find trustworthy answers. Public education to help young adults become stronger and more insightful media consumers has been identified as more effective than legislating social media platforms.[4]

The public is also expressing anxiety about the social impact of fake news, with many reporting concern that it could influence the outcome of elections. Fake news and misinformation have greatly affected their confidence in government institutions.[5] Experts warn that it may influence the core functions of the democratic system.[6] A variety of researchers report that dubious and inflammatory content can undermine the quality of public debate, promote misperceptions, foster greater hostility toward political opponents, and corrode trust in government and journalism.[7] Researchers have documented a concerning disconnection and

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[1] WATSON, A.: *Fake News Worldwide – Statistics & Facts*. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/topics/6341/fake-news-worldwide/#topicOverview>.

[2] WATSON, A.: *News Consumers Who Saw False or Misleading Information about Selected Topics in the Last Week Worldwide as of February 2022, by Region*. [online]. [2023-02-24]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1317019/false-information-topics-worldwide/>.

[3] CHENG, Y., CHEN, Z. F.: The Influence of Presumed Fake News Influence: Examining Public Support for Corporate Corrective Response, Media Literacy Interventions, and Governmental Regulation. In *Mass Communication and Society*, 2020, Vol. 23, No. 5, p. 712; VESE, D.: Governing Fake News: The Regulation of Social Media and the Right to Freedom of Expression in the Era of Emergency. In *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 2022, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 480.

[4] IRETON, C., POSETTI, J.: *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. Paris : UNESCO Publishing, 2018, p. 33.

[5] See: CARLSON, M.: Fake News as an Informational Moral Panic: The Symbolic Deviancy of Social Media During the 2016 US Presidential Election. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2020, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 374-388.

[6] See: BENNETT, W. L., LIVINGSTON, S.: The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions. In *European Journal of Communication*, 2018, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 122-139.

[7] OGNYANOVA, K., LAZER, D., ROBERTSON, R. E., WILSON, C.: Misinformation in Action: Fake News Exposure Is Linked to Lower Trust in Media, Higher Trust in Government When Your Side Is in Power. In *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review,* 2020, Vol. 1, No. 3, no paging.

disengagement with news, with an increase in the proportion of global news consumers who are avoiding news.[8] A broad process of "truth decay" has been observed and is resulting in greater disagreement about facts, widespread preferences for personal experience and opinion over fact, and growing distrust in sources of factual information.[9]

A consequence of political polarization and the prevalence of disinformation on social media makes politics less attractive for people, which can reduce democratic political engagement.[10] Research with young people reveals that experiences with fake news may be indicating declining trust in the information they receive from legitimate news organizations.[11] The *World Health Organization* reports that the public are experiencing mental, social, political and/or economic distress due to misleading and false health-related content on social media during pandemics, health emergencies, and humanitarian crises, and has noted that this can negatively affect people's health behaviours.[12] Fake news has even had fatal consequences globally where hate crimes and other forms of violence have been prompted by its spread, and people have been left unprotected because of health disinformation during outbreaks of deadly diseases.[13]

Misinformation and fake-news campaigns can be amplified and circulated through social networks or by targeted campaigns fomenting discord on hot-button policy issues, including immigration, refugees, and climate change, possibly impacting social license and election outcomes. Many young adults simply do not possess the media or information literacy to accurately assess information they are sharing. The time has come for creative solutions.

2 Literature Review

Fake news is not new – misinformation and disinformation have always been an aspect of the news media. However, the development and adoption of new communication technologies have accelerated the speed and breadth of its reach and provide fresh evidence for the seventeenth-century insight that *"a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes."*[14] In addition, the nature and usage of social media have made it easier to insert automated messages into the public conversation for reasons of profit and/or to sow discord.[15] Communications scholars note that the words we use to name this phenomena can themselves act as a framing device triggering different associations for different terms.[16] Some researchers

[8] NEWMAN, N.: *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*. Oxford : Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022, p. 13; WENZEL, A.: To Verify or to Disengage: Coping with "Fake News" and Ambiguity. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2019, Vol. 13, p. 1988. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/10025/2636>.

[9] KAVANAGH, J., RICH, M. D.: *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. Santa Monica, CA : RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 191.

[10] REGLITZ, M.: Fake News and Democracy. In *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 2022, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 176.

[11] See: ELVESTAD, E., PHILLIPS, A., FEUERSTEIN, M.: Can Trust in Traditional News Media Explain Cross-National Differences in News Exposure of Young People Online? A Comparative Study of Israel, Norway and the United Kingdom. In *Digital Journalism*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 216-235.

[12] See: BORGES, D. O., NASCIMENTO, I. J., PIZARRO, A. B., ALMEIDA, J. M., AZZOPARDI-MUSCAT, N., GONÇALVES, M. A., BJÖRKLUND, M., NOVILLO-ORTIZ, D.: Infodemics and Health Misinformation: A Systematic Review of Reviews. In *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2022, Vol. 100, No. 9, p. 544-561.

[13] PIAZZA, J. A.: Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism. In *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 2022, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 61.

[14] CHOKSHI, N.: *That Wasn't Mark Twain: How a Misquotation Is Born*. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/famous-misquotations.html>.

[15] BAKIR, V., MCSTAY, A.: Fake News and the Economy of Emotions. In *Digital Journalism*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 15.

[16] TANDOC, E. C., SEET, S. K.: War of the Words: How Individuals Respond to "Fake News," "Misinformation," "Disinformation," and "Online Falsehoods". In *Journalism Practice*, 2022, p. 6. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2110929>.

recommend the term "misinformation" as a less volatile word, noting the negative associations and impact of "fake news" which has been weaponized by political leaders and partisan media.[17] In this article, I will use Higdon's definition of fake news – any false or misleading information introduced as fact-based news.[18] The term "fake news" continues to have relevance as it has both the benefit and drawback of having been shown to elicit the highest level of concern, perceived severity, and treatment recommendation.[19]

The spread of fake news has exacerbated societal strife including current economic and health crises.[20] Scholars are concerned about its potential impact on democratic processes in light of evidence of declining trust in democratic institutions.[21] While some focus on regulation of social media and journalism as a solution, many other see education as the way forward.[22] Media literacy is the educational solution that has the potential to effectively arm the public against fake news.[23]

Media literacy refers to developing knowledge of media forms and content and often includes creating media products. It has the benefit of cultivating important awareness skills that protect the public from manipulation and empower them to identify reliable information needed to be engaged citizens in a democratic context.[24] Many communication scholars prefer a critical media literacy orientation because it extends the skill set to include an understanding of ideology and propaganda and invites the learner to consider who benefits by the perpetuation of certain information even when found in "official" sources.[25] Debates between media literacy and critical media literacy are common in the United States, in particular focusing on the partisan politicization of the issue, and a move toward "objectivity" as a means to bridge the divide.[26]

Critical media literacy embraces a broader understanding of the definition, producers, and influence of fake news, combined with the exploration of power, resistance, and liberation.[27] Much of the public pedagogy that mass media (including social media) teach about race, gender, class, sexuality, consumption, fear, and morals reflects corporate profit motives and ideologies at the expense of social concerns needed for a healthy democracy and sustainable planet.[28]

17 COLLIER, J., VAN DUYN, E.: Fake News by Any Other Name: Phrases for False Content and Effects on Public Perceptions of U.S. News Media. In *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 2022, p. 15. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2022.2148487>.

18 HIGDON, N.: What is Fake News? A Foundational Question for Developing Effective Critical News Literacy Education. In *Democratic Communiqué*, 2022, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 3.

19 TANDOC, E. C., SEET, S. K.: War of the Words: How Individuals Respond to "Fake News," "Misinformation," "Disinformation," and "Online Falsehoods". In *Journalism Practice*, 2022, p. 11. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2110929>.

20 ARAL, S.: *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How We Must Adapt*. London : Penguin Books, 2021, p. 26.

21 See: CHAMBERS, S.: Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere? In *Political Studies*, 2020, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 147-163.

22 VESE, D.: Governing Fake News: The Regulation of Social Media and the Right to Freedom of Expression in the Era of Emergency. In *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 2022, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 480.

23 MCDOUGALL, J.: Media Literacy versus Fake News. In *Medijske Studije*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 19, p. 30.

24 HOBBS, R.: *Media Literacy in Action: Questioning the Media*. New York, NY : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021, p. 4; KLINE, S., STEWART, K., MURPHY, D.: Media Literacy in the Risk Society: Toward a Risk Reduction Strategy. In *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 2006, Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 137.

25 KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*. Leiden : Brill, 2019, p. 21.

26 HIGDON, N., BUTLER, A., SWERZENSKI, J. D.: Inspiration and Motivation: The Similarities and Differences Between Critical and Acritical Media Literacy. In *Democratic Communiqué*, 2021, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 7; MIHAILIDIS, P., RAMASUBRAMANIAN, S., TULLY, M., FOSTER, B., RIEWESTAHL, E., JOHNSON, P., ANGOVE, S. Y.: Do Media Literacies Approach Equity and Justice? In *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2021, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 2; TEBALDI, C., NYGREEN, K.: Opening or Impasse? Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy in a Post-Truth Era. In *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 2021, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 146.

27 STODDARD, J., TUNSTALL, J., WALKER, L., WIGHT, E.: Teaching Beyond Verifying Sources and "Fake News": Critical Media Education to Challenge Media Injustices. In *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2021, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 60.

28 KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*. Leiden : Brill, 2019, p. 101.

Media literacy in formal public education began in the 1980s in Australia, Britain, and Canada, although nonformal media education has existed for decades.[29] Len Masterman in England and Barry Duncan in Canada are the pioneers who developed eight key concepts.[30]

The most important is that all media are constructions, not simply reflecting external reality, but presenting carefully crafted constructions that include many decisions. The media construct reality and are responsible for most observations and experiences from which we build our personal understandings of the world. Audiences negotiate meaning in media, according to personal needs and anxieties, pleasures or troubles, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, and moral standpoint.

Media messages have commercial implications. Media literacy aims to encourage awareness of how these impinge on content, technique, and distribution. Questions of ownership and control are central. Media messages also contain ideological and value messages, conveying, explicitly or implicitly, messages about the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, and the acceptance of authority and patriotism. Media messages contain social and political implications about issues such as civil rights, migrant crises, and health pandemics.

Critical media literacy is inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. These scholars explore race, class, gender, and other cultural forces to process how media reinforce cultural norms.[31] This approach explores how power, ideology, and sociocultural context shape media messages and representations.[32] Critical media literacy rigorously examines the politics of representation and how historically disenfranchised social groups are represented.[33] Encouraging media literacy facilitates a more critically engaged civic society.[34]

Fake news comes from within the mainstream media because of a rush to publish, and staff cutbacks, but at times they distort, lie, and manufacture consent as part of a larger agenda.[35] Many media literacy advocates guide the public to mainstream media as a trusted source. Critical scholars do not.[36] Mainstream media's power means their narratives are largely unquestioned.[37]

Some scholars suggest that mainstream media see the uncertainty about fake news as an opportunity to re-establish their dominance in public opinion and information, as well as recapturing advertising profits by limiting audience access to alternative media sources.[38]

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[29] FUNK, S., KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: Critical Media Literacy as Transformative Pedagogy. In YILDIZ, M. N., KEENGWE, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Research on Media Literacy in the Digital Age.* Hershey : IGI Global, 2016, p. 324.

[30] JOLLS, T., WILSON, C.: The Core Concepts: Fundamental to Media Literacy Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. In *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2014, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 69.

[31] MORRELL, E.: Toward Equity and Diversity in Literacy Research, Policy, and Practice: A Critical, Global Approach. In *Journal of Literacy Research*, 2017, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 458.

[32] HIGDON, N., BUTLER, A., SWERZENSKI, J. D.: Inspiration and Motivation: The Similarities and Differences Between Critical and Acritical Media Literacy. In *Democratic Communiqué*, 2021, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 3.

[33] FUNK, S., KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: Critical Media Literacy as Transformative Pedagogy. In YILDIZ, M. N., KEENGWE, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Research on Media Literacy in the Digital Age.* Hershey : IGI Global, 2016, p. 321.

[34] FOWLER-WATT, K., MCDOUGALL, J.: Media Literacy vs Fake News: Fact-Checking and Verification in the Era of Fake News and Post-Truths. In *Journalism Education*, 2020, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 63. [online]. [2023-02-22]. Available at: <https://journalism-education.org/2020/07/media-literacy-vs-fake-news-fact-checking-and-verification-in-the-era-of-fake-news-and-post-truths/>.

[35] DIMAGGIO, A. R.: *Fake News in America: Contested Meanings in the Post-Truth Era*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 31.

[36] HIGDON, N.: *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education.* Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 2020, p. 10.

[37] MARMOL, E.: Nine Key Insights. In HOECHSMANN, M., THÉSÉE, G., CARR, P. R. (eds.): *Education for Democracy 2.0.* Leiden : Brill, 2020, p. 290.

[38] MARMOL, E., MAGER, L.: Fake News: The Trojan Horse for Silencing Alternative News and Reestablishing Corporate News Dominance. In ROTH, A. L., HUFF, M., Project Censored (eds.): *Censored 2020. Through the Looking Glass: The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2018-2019*. New York, Oakland, London : Seven Stories Press, 2020, p. 232.

There has been a growing call for critical media literacy educators to develop and identify effective strategies to address fake news[39] with an emphasis on global perspectives.[40] Some scholars have pressed the importance of this, noting that countries outside the United States may have a greater need for students to think critically about the news media because they are seeing American values imported into their culture.[41] The European Union has encouraged *"media literacy educators and stakeholders to document their best practice in the form of empirical classroom research, and to address enduring disconnects between theory and practice, conceptual frameworks and pedagogic practice, and educational/political policy and classroom practices."*[42] Best practice involves moving away from competence models and protectionist approaches to embrace a more genuinely critical and holistic media literacy.[43] Media literacy from a critical thinking and social justice framework is a necessary skill for the success of learners in the twenty-first century. Media-literate citizens have the ability to better understand how a message is created and to construct meaning out of it.[44]

A recent study of undergraduate students at a public university in Ghana found that when students were provided with appropriate media literacy training, they were more likely to determine authenticity of information and less likely to share inaccurate stories. The researchers concluded that, *"when* [media literacy] *increases, sharing of fake news decreases."*[45] Similarly, a study of media literacy interventions with undergraduates in Türkiye found that students gained an important awareness of the nature and power of mass media messages.[46] A Brazilian study found that students gained a high level of critical media literacy when taught to critically examine health misinformation, and consequently urged others to be cautious when sharing news, emphasizing their responsibility as citizens to check facts first and to realize the possible consequences of not doing so.[47]

The importance of providing training in critical media literacy for young people determined to be "at risk" has also been noted by Finnish researchers who considered youth who drop out of school, display social and learning difficulties, or encounter challenges in language or life situations.[48] They propose an inclusive approach to media education to advance their motivation to participate, communicative media skills, autonomous agency, relatedness, and experiences of inclusion in both educational settings and society.[49] Researchers studying the learning needs of young migrants in Europe note that in an increasingly polarized mediatized world, there must

39 KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*. Leiden : Brill, 2019, p. 63.
40 DE ABREU, B. S.: Global Perspective on Media Literacy. In CHRIST, W. G., DE ABREU, B. S. (eds.): *Media Literacy in a Disruptive Media Environment*. 1st Edition. New York, NY : Routledge, 2020, p. 11.
41 KUBEY, R.: Obstacles to the Development of Media Education in the United States. In *Journal of Communication*, 1998, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 63.
42 MCDOUGALL, J.: *Fake News vs Media Studies: Travels in a False Binary*. London : Springer Nature, 2019, p. 27.
43 MCDOUGALL, J.: Media Literacy versus Fake News. In *Medijske Studije*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 19, p. 41.
44 FUNK, S., KELLNER, D., SHARE, J.: Critical Media Literacy as Transformative Pedagogy. In YILDIZ, M. N., KEENGWE, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Research on Media Literacy in the Digital Age*. Hershey : IGI Global, 2016, p. 319.
45 DAME ADJIN-TETTEY, T.: Combating Fake News, Disinformation, and Misinformation: Experimental Evidence for Media Literacy Education. In *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 2022, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 9.
46 DOLANBAY, H.: The Experience of Media Literacy Education of University Students and the Awareness They Have Gained: An Action Research. In *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching*, 2022, Vol. 9, No. 4, p. 1621.
47 MEYRER, K., KERSCH, D. F.: Can High School Students Check the Veracity of Information about COVID-19? A Case Study on Critical Media Literacy in Brazilian ESL Classes. In *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 2022, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 24.
48 PIENIMÄKI, M., KOTILAINEN, S.: Media Education for the Inclusion of At-Risk Youth. In HOECHSMANN, M., THÉSÉE, G., CARR, P. R. (eds.): *Education for Democracy 2.0.* Leiden : Brill, 2020, p. 67.
49 Ibidem, p. 68.

be better recognition of how the needs of certain young people diverge depending on how they are situated in racialized, gendered, and classed structures of power.[50]

A chorus of scholars is calling for development of a more inviting approach to media education, acknowledging a variety of voices, and providing skills and recognition for everyone, irrespective of their social class, status, gender identification, sexuality, race, ability, and other variables.[51] The inclusion of comics and graphic narratives is one innovation that may be effective. Many critical media literacy scholars are defining media literacy texts as those that rely on both print and image literacies.[52] Scholars have advanced their understanding of the value of multimodality and contributed to our appreciation of the importance of visualized storytelling as a growing communication type in the globalized world.[53] Introducing multimodal approaches in the classroom that combine visual and linguistic modes in creative ways have been determined to be helpful in developing students' conceptual understanding skills and engage both reluctant readers and new language learners.[54] Comics and graphic novels effectively demonstrate the multimodal interplay, incorporating visual, spatial, and linguistic meaning.[55] Lida Tsene (founder of the *Athens Comic Library*) has observed first-hand how multimodal meanings are made as people engage with comics. She notes that comics have certain "superpowers" that make them an efficient learning tool. Skills, such as storytelling, visual literacy, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, empathy, seeking and synthesis of information, understanding of reality, and multimedia and transmedia content production, are encouraged while reading or creating a comic story.[56] Comics, combining benefits of visualization with powerful metaphors and character-driven narratives, have the potential to make complex subjects more accessible and engaging to a broader audience.[57] An Indonesian study found that improving Big Data literacy through comics is a novel and noteworthy approach.[58]

Developing critical media literacy approaches to fake news that utilize comics and graphic narratives can help students decipher how media messages are constructed, and discover how they create meaning in ways that are often hidden. This process is similar to the synthesis, decoding, interpretation, and transmedia navigation of reading and creating comics.[59] Comics and graphic narratives have been called *"a skill vital to decoding fake news"*.[60]

[50] LEURS, K., OMEROVIĆ, E., BRUINENBERG, H., SPRENGER, S.: Critical Media Literacy Through Making Media: A Key to Participation for Young Migrants? In *Communications*, 2018, Vol. 43, No. 3, no paging.
[51] BOZDAĞ, V., NEAG, A., LEURS, K.: Inclusive Media Literacy Education for Diverse Societies. In *Media and Communication*, 2022, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 249.
[52] MONNIN, K. M.: Teaching Media Literacy with Graphic Novels. In *New Horizons in Education*, 2010, Vol. 58, No. 3, p. 79.
[53] KRESS, G., VAN LEEUWEN, T.: *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*. London, New York : Routledge, 2006, p. 3.
[54] SERAFINI, F.: *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy*. New York, NY : Teachers College Press, 2014, p. 27; JACOBS, D.: *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*. London, New York, New Delhi, Sydney : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 201.
[55] JACOBS, D.: *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*. London, New York, New Delhi, Sydney : Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 5.
[56] TSENE, L.: Using Comics as a Media Literacy Tool for Marginalized Groups: The Case of Athens Comics Library. In *Media and Communication*, 2022, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 290.
[57] FARINELLA, M.: The Potential of Comics in Science Communication. In *Journal of Science Communication*, 2008, Vol. 17, No. 1, no paging.
[58] FARIS, M.: Comic for Developing Big Data Literacy. In *Ultimacomm: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 2022, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 48.
[59] TSENE, L.: Using Comics as a Media Literacy Tool for Marginalized Groups: The Case of Athens Comics Library. In *Media and Communication*, 2022, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 290.
[60] GARDNER, A.: Graphic Possibilities in an Era of Fake News. In *English Journal*, 2019, Vol. 108, No. 5, p. 54.

3 Methodology

In December 2019, I was invited into my colleague's classrooms at a small, liberal arts university in Canada, where I used the graphic format to teach 300 students how to investigate news stories. Before the study even started, there was a measure of success as students were clearly excited to learn through reading comics. That could be attributed to the departure from typical lessons, but that immediate receptiveness is worth noting. Comics may be regarded as trivial or shallow in some academic circles, but they are highly impactful when they distill a verbal point, especially when accompanied by strong visuals that draw the reader/student into the conversation.

The workshop design was based on a review of the literature of critical media literacy, current developments in fake news examples, and relevant aspects of graphic narrative approaches. Insights learned were applied regarding the use of graphic images, illustrations, and the medium of comics to effectively communicate complex issues and facilitate understanding of how to dissect fake news strategies – appeal to emotion, unnamed sources, and spoofing (imitation of a legitimate news site) – as well as dealing with consequences such as confrontations, fractious political engagement, and divisive news commentary. Scholars in the emerging field of graphic narrative theory have argued that comic-style narratives can accelerate cognition because they focus attention on what is most crucial.[61] The pictures in the comic format are thought to clarify complex content, especially for visual learners.[62]

I sought to develop comic materials that feature interactive dialogue between characters. Instead of creating an omniscient narrator, common in educational graphic narratives, I chose an interactive format as an ideal vehicle to engage with fake news and cultivate conversations about what information can be trusted. Dialogue in graphic books often occurs between "experienced" characters who impart information and "experiencing" characters who have things explained to them or who discover information.[63] This process has been described as "focalizing" because it invites identification from the reader.[64]

Already warmed to the concept, students were commenting early in the study that they enjoyed the activity and the energy of the cartoon characters' conversations. Through the characters, I showed the students strategies that included reverse image search, researching sources referenced in news articles, and directly checking information on government websites. This created increased confidence and strengthened their critique skills, prompting them to ask the right questions. Students were inspired to rethink what they thought they knew, including the reliability of the first results that pop up when researching a subject using a search engine. They realized that those results may include fake news that continues to snowball across the Internet.

Through numerous carefully curated cartoons, students were invited to consider the economic and power dynamics behind the creation and dissemination of a fake news story. Scenarios in the graphics featured groups finding their way to successful conclusions by respectfully working together and keeping their critical thinking caps on. The issues were based on current real-world examples of fake news. Putting analytic tools to work, characters go beyond the content to investigate all stakeholders involved.

The topics, although based on different scenarios, are relevant to contemporary societal issues and common responses to fake news. The characters are relatable. They represent inclusivity with careful attention paid to avoiding stereotypical representations. Each situation

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[61] See: COHN, N.: *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. London, New York, New Delhi, Sydney : Bloomsbury, 2013.

[62] TILLEY, C. L., WEINER, R. G.: Teaching and Learning with Comics. In BRAMLETT, F., COOK, R. T., MESKIN, A. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Comics*. New York, NY : Routledge, 2016, p. 376.

[63] MIKKONEN, K.: Presenting Minds in Graphic Narratives. In *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 313.

[64] GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 76.

walks learners through a journey to an insight that showcases numerous investigative tools. The comic conversations swivel realistically to emotionally charged comments that compel the reader to experience their own emotional response and become further invested in the storyline.

Figure 1 shows the student handout about spoofing in which a family is participating in a school competition on fake news detection. The children show their parents what they have learned about media literacy and earn a pizza prize. The family members delve into an online report about the government banning the singing of the national anthem at sporting events. Immediately, the dad comments that such a ban represents government overreach, which is ruining the country. The daughter spars back and suggests that it was overreach to require the anthem in the first place. Her brother pulls the focus of the discussion back to the issue by reminding his family of an important tool he has learned – reading past the headline.

The family's notices that although the network news broadcaster's website looks legitimate, the address is incorrect and does not have the requisite "about" page. They find a claim that the author won multiple Pulitzer Prizes, but he isn't on the list of winners at the prize website. Not swayed by that revelation, the father tells the others that they are overthinking the article. The news story cited the executive order banning the anthem, and when he searched the order number, lots of websites popped up. He confidently pronounced the story to be true. Remembering their critical media literacy lessons, and the effective tools they were given, the children check a government website to find that no executive order with that number exists.

As Figure 1 shows, this dialogue intentionally highlights core principles of fake news detection.

FIGURE 1: *Example of comic series #1 that helps explain the concept of spoofing*
Source: Author-designed workshop materials. Illustrated by: Alan Spinney

Figure 2 depicts the student handout about ownership influences in which four colleagues in a scientific lab study the phenomenon of fake news. On a radio broadcast, the colleagues hear that recent survey results show that a majority of people do not believe humans cause global warming. Their reactions, which occur in the casual context of preparing for a meeting, reflect the engaging personalities typical of the comic medium. *"That makes me so mad,"* one lab-coated woman begins. Another colleague gets to the heart of the matter and wonders how, with so much available – and accessible – science-based information urging immediate solutions, people are still in denial.

His colleague pivots from anger to empathy for the public. She attempts to make her point with a humorous analogy about people shoving cotton swabs in their ears, despite knowing they should not, something she does herself. The pragmatic male colleague fires back, saying that her example was not analogous because using cotton swabs against advice hurts only the user and isn't comparable to human actions that negatively affect others.

Another colleague offers comic relief, laughingly claiming he cannot hear them because his ear hurts. His joking demonstrates empathy for those who do not always respond to science and health advice. Enter the colleague – a critical media literacy thinker – who reminds the

others that trustworthy, factual information starts with good sources. That brings everyone to the same page as they recall their first-hand observations of biased news about climate change, and question the agenda of some media owners who consistently raise doubts about human causes. Their colleague notes research showing that fewer people trust science because of how some media outlets encourage skepticism of climate change. She says people who understand the tactics used to trick them are more likely to seek – and accept – facts.

FIGURE 2: *Example of comic series #1 that helps explain the concept of news media ownership influence*
Source: Author-designed workshop materials. Illustrated by: Alan Spinney

The next step in the study was an assessment. Participants were given cartoons with interacting characters and empty speech bubbles. Shown a piece of fake news on a social media site, they had 30 minutes to write conversations explaining the fake news, reasons it was posted, and ways to prove it false.

Figure 3 shows the panels provided to give students the opportunity to write thoughtful interactions. As it is important to learn to distill information, the speech bubbles were dauntingly and purposely tiny. The graphic format forces the writer to communicate successfully with the smallest number of words. Visual media – body language and the principle of "show, not tell" – is essential to conveying the message.

FIGURE 2: *Empty comic that students completed themselves with the prompt: "Why Is the media showing fake news about the shark? Fill in the empty speech bubbles to create a conversation that helps reader learn about fake news."*
Source: Author-designed workshop materials. Illustrated by: Alan Spinney

In this study, participants were not asked to draw their own characters because I have observed in other workshops that asking students to draw cartoons takes time and encouragement as drawing – even stick figures – can cause anxiety and cloud thought processes. The attributes of the cartoon characters are a critical aspect, needing to promote inclusivity, so students see themselves in one or more of them. Students didn't express concerns about any of the types of pre-drawn characters they were given to work with.

A professional illustrator was commissioned to draw the workshop materials, focusing on portraying a wide range of ethnicities, disabilities, and body types without perpetuating character stereotypes. It was important to include marginalized groups and to represent them in a respectful way. His characters are presented as interesting, sympathetic, engaging, and diverse. I researched the best ways to approach representation to get even the smallest details right. There had been interesting discussions around diversity and representation in comics with many complaints from marginalized groups who felt absent from comics, or reduced to caricature.

For example, I reviewed research about representations of disability. In many comics, characters are pictured in manual wheelchairs with someone pushing from behind, which does not represent people who use electric wheelchairs independently. I was careful to make sure that I was aware of any concerns expressed about representation and to present these to the artist, who was very receptive. He also did his own research within the illustrator community to present people fairly. Those conversations and that partnership were a very rewarding and exciting part of the process. I believe that we need to be inclusive in the way we teach and promote critical media literacy so that it will resonate and be effective.

Characters have distinct personalities, relationships, and traits that draw students into the story. Some characters almost always get things wrong. Some are more trustworthy. But they grow over time, demonstrating how people can change the way they think. They work at maintaining a nonconfrontational approach that fosters cooperation rather than defensiveness, which can ultimately be the means to a truthful end. This was done intentionally given the tense atmosphere created by fake news with people reporting that they have had to drop friends and even family from their social circles because of serious conflict.

4 Results

It was clear that this approach created a space for learning as students encountered new information in a relaxed, recreational setting, following the flow of a conversation in a visual format and with a humorous tone.

Student-created dialogues offered insight into the ability students developed to think for themselves, use critical analysis tools, look behind the scenes for motives and agendas, and be engaged. They demonstrated empathy and a sense of social responsibility. Tables 1 and 2 show that multiple responses raised questions and concerns about the impact of fake news on society and implications for individual response. They showed an awareness of how this can undermine liberal democracy and how fake news can come from domestic – and not just foreign – actors. Some felt that the fake news phenomenon is inevitable while others communicated empowered engagement and a desire to help others learn critical media literacy skills. An additional cluster of themes focused particularly on making sense of why the mainstream news media might share fake news, as this was inherent in the comic they were given to complete. Their answers showed an understanding of the monetization of fake news. In addition, several students included comments about the agenda-setting role of media and the potential for fake news to be used to in the interests of those in power.

THEMES	SELECTED EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-CREATED DIALOGUE
Awakening to how widespread the fake news might be	• It is so shocking other news aren't telling us about this; We deserve to know! • They are endangering us! Yeah, like what else aren't they telling us?! • It looked real! How was I supposed to know it wasn't true. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to get properly informed though.
Inevitability of fake news distortions	• We can't always trust what we see. Fake news is an inescapable phenomenon. • With fake news becoming more and more popular, stories like these will be a whole lot more common.
Concerns about the impact of fake news on democracy	• You should learn about fake news. It's hurting our democracy. • Fake news causes rifts in society because no one can tell what the truth is anymore. • It's a shame that the culture of fake news has eliminated the people's trust in the media.
Empowerment to identify fake news and desire to teach others	• Is there a way we can prove to people that this is fake news? • We should research the topic! We need to know if there was actually a hurricane and how we get a shark onto a highway. • We need to educate people on what they are reading online as well. • Showing them the warning signs would help the readers, right? • We could show examples of fake versus Real News too. What do you think? That's brilliant! What are we waiting for? Let's get to it! • I think we really need to talk about teaching you how to recognize fake news. No more *Facebook* news for you.
Self-reliance orientation to checking fake news	• Well, I guess that goes to show we can't rely on one source of news. We need to always be fact-checking the stuff we read for ourselves. • We just have to make sure our sources are credible. It seems like that task is getting harder and harder each day. We have to make sure we use more than one source and gather all the facts. • I believe that finding a site that's willing to provide their sources is a good sign that their stories are valid.
Accountability focus on perpetrators	• As citizens and consumers, we have a responsibility to be critical! Do not accept stories blindly. More than that we have to take action. Hold those responsible for their actions!

TABLE 1: *Themes of the student responses: engagement with the problem of fake news*
Source: own processing, 2023

THEMES	SELECTED EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-CREATED DIALOGUE
Qui Bono – focus on who benefits from fake news	• Consider whose interests the article might serve. Also consider who the target audience is. • This story has been thought up to get attention, money and to favour a certain political agenda. • Why would the media be warning us about shark attacks? Because fear sells. The media loves to capitalize on human emotion. Being scared can assist in maintaining viewership since frightened individuals want to stay in the loop. • Media companies take advantage of people's laziness to fact check or maybe they're too trusting but when people just take the news as true the media can create chaos. In many cases this breeds moral panics by making people believe issues are bigger than they are.

Mainstream news media can include fake news because of profit motives	• It could be fake news. All those people wanting to make money by getting people to share their over-the-top stories on social media! Even if it's featured on multiple news sources, it could be fake. Everyone wants a piece of the pie; everyone wants the breaking story! • My goodness! I can't believe it! I thought that I wouldn't be tricked because of all my research, but the media is sneakier than I first thought! • By creating such a sensational story on hot topics, it will get more people watching. When media cares more about money than truth, you get fake news! • The media often sensationalizes stories to get more views. That's why you should be careful what you click on and try to verify who writes the articles. • This website is making money off the link you clicked. Yes, that's what they do to make you click it, even though it's fake. • Just because the story has so many views doesn't mean it's real. Some companies just want to maximize views to make money. • This problem is continuing to grow because capitalism favours money over people. So, they keep us in the dark. #Fuck capitalism.
Mainstream news media can include fake news because of power motives	• Media companies make a lot of money off fake news. • They also distract people from what really matters sometimes. That's just the reality. • It helps those in power control what the public knows.

TABLE 2: *Themes of the student responses: comments about mainstream media's role in fake news dissemination*

Source: own processing, 2023

5 Discussion

The graphic format was well-received, and the students demonstrated comprehension of core concepts in the creation of their own comics. Through their characters, they expressed concern about fake news and how to recognize red flags. Students engaged their comic characters in complex discussions about the political economy of the news media and demonstrated that they understood the financial motives underpinning some fake news. In addition, some of them identified the agenda-setting role of the mainstream media and raised thoughtful questions about who benefits politically from fake news. Overall, they demonstrated that they were confidently able to explain and teach the topic to others. The exercise was clearly a positive learning experience, with an effective uptake of information and demonstrated results.

The size of the comic bubble forces a student to really get to the heart of a topic and create dialogue that sounds real and is effective in concisely communicating a message. Reading graphic novels can also work to relax a reader to the point where they are more receptive to learning and relating to a topic or character. The novelty and creativity of taking in information through comics can create a more open frame of mind, allowing for a reader's defenses and preconceptions to begin to drop.

An effective method of delivering the information and topics offers a seamless way into the kinds of conversations a facilitator might want to have in your community. It is crucial to recognize that there are so many ways to facilitate conversations about media literacy, including multimodal exercises that go beyond purely text-based formats that may lack necessary opportunities for creativity and vulnerability and thus prove less impactful for students.

Given the isolating and alienating impacts of fake news on civic engagement, students' attitudes toward the learning activity and the content of their comic dialogues was heartening. The students created character dialogue that enthusiastically engaged with identifying fake news and initiated a variety of actions to address it. This community-oriented approach to fact- checking and peer teaching may be an important part of the solution to living in a world rife with unreliable information and finding an alternative to retreating from political and civic engagement.

6 Conclusion

The pervasiveness of fake news presents an increasingly difficult challenge for educators. It is everywhere, including in well-respected commercial media outlets. Fake news is being read, watched, shared and, most importantly, believed. It is time to "think outside the box" and come up with creative solutions. Experts suggest that research initiatives should focus on how to motivate young adults to fact check, to provide media literacy skills so they can evaluate information and find the truth. Young adults need to become stronger and more insightful media consumers. They need to learn to understand what is real and what isn't.

This paper demonstrates an approach that works well with post-secondary students – the use of comics. Combining benefits of visualization with powerful metaphors and character-driven narratives, comics have the potential to make complex subjects more accessible and engaging. Comics may be regarded as trivial or shallow in some academic circles, but they have proven to be highly impactful when they distill a verbal point, and present strong visuals that draw the reader/student into the conversation. Given the isolating and alienating impacts of fake news on civic engagement, students' attitudes toward this learning activity and the content of their comic dialogues was heartening.

The novelty and creativity of taking in information through comics creates a more open frame of mind, allowing for a reader's defenses and preconceptions to begin to drop. An imaginative and sometimes humorous approach has shown impressive results. Decoding fake news is not always easy, but using comics could continue to increase student's ability to learn and share this vital skill.

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Erin Steuter is professor of sociology with a focus on critical media studies and ideological representations in news and popular culture. She has won multiple awards for her teaching and research and is the author of three books about the media and the war on terror including *Pop Culture Goes to War: Enlisting and Resisting Militarism in the War on Terror*. She recently published a graphic novel about fake news entitled *Won't Get Fooled Again: A Graphic Guide to Fake News*. She regularly offers workshops for schools and community groups that engage the public in contemporary media literacy issues.