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What we should know to design a debunking course: Assessing logical thinking and perceptions about the information crisis among college students

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Extended abstract

Various reasons have been pointed out for the current information crisis (Wardle, Derakhshan, Burns, & Dias, 2017): the information overload (Moeller, 1999), the post-factuality and cultural relativism (McNair, 2018), the collapse of trust (d'Ancona, 2017), the filter bubbles and datafication of our constructed view of the world (Couldry & Hepp, 2018), apart from the political and economic causes. Various fact-checking initiatives have also emerged to tackle the misinformation problem: from online games to educative projects about verification and professional journalism websites dedicated to fact-checking.

However, despite being an important tool to fight misinformation, the research tells us that fact-checking alone is far from enough (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). There is a whole body of literature pointing to the psychological dispositions that play a role in the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation, such as theories of cognitive bias, motivated reasoning and availability heuristic.

The concept of media literacy is often associated with critical thinking. However, many media literacy measures do not put as much as an emphasis on logical reasoning, as they put on self-perceived media literacy, perceptions of the value of media literacy (Vraga, Tully, Kotcher, Smithson, & Broeckelman-Post, 2015), knowledge about audiences and reception, message construction, and production (Maksl, Ashley, & Craft, 2015; Primack et al., 2006).

Likewise, most surveys done among the Portuguese University students' population about media literacy focused mostly on media use and civic life (Lopes, 2015), knowledge about the median and message construction (João & Menezes, 2008), and less on cognitive-critical reasoning (Lopes, Pereira, Moura, & Carvalho, 2015). On the other hand, in Portugal, as in many other parts of the globe, the focus of journalism University education is more often on production, media sociology and theories of communication, and less often on media psychology, according to the curricula available on various university websites. Production

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can easily be learned through traineeships; however, once one enters the journalism job market, one has less time and perhaps less motivation to study and think about the media effects and psychological processes behind information acquisition.

This paper aims at examining the use of logical and probability thinking by university students of communication in relationship to their awareness about the information crisis. This study is guided by the need to provide a research-based instructional strategy for the development of a new course on debunking.

It does so by surveying a group of 37 Portuguese university students about their use of logic and critical thinking, through a validated scale (Pinker, 2021). Additionally, it assesses the student's attitudes and perceptions about the problem of fake news through a measure used in a survey already conducted in 27 countries, but not in Portugal (IPSOS, 2018).

The results support the argument that to fight the ongoing information crisis, it may also be essential to increase the teaching of critical thinking. This exploratory study contributes to filling a gap in the literature about the use of logical reasoning among communication students and to the wider debate about how we can teach them about debunking.

Keywords

information crisis; fake news; media literacy; debunking; logic and critical thinking