

MODULE 4

Combating disinformation and misinformation through Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

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Synopsis

This module introduces students to the concept of Media and Information Literacy¹²¹ (MIL) to understand news as a means to detect ‘information disorder’ in obvious and subliminal messages. MIL is an umbrella concept used by UNESCO to stress the inter-relatedness of competencies regarding information broadly, and media in particular. These cover human rights literacy (especially the right to freedom of expression as each person’s right to seek, receive and impart information and opinion); news literacy (including literacy about journalistic standards and ethics); advertising literacy; computer literacy; understanding of the ‘attention economy’; intercultural literacy; privacy literacy; etc.. It includes understanding how communications interact with individual identity and social developments. MIL is increasingly an essential life skill – needed to know what is co-shaping one’s identity and how one can navigate information fog and avoid concealed mines within the mist. MIL informs our consumption, production, discovery, evaluation and sharing of information, and our understanding of ourselves and others in the information society.

News literacy is the more specific ability to understand the language and conventions of news as a genre, and to recognise how these features can be exploited with malicious intent. Important as this is, however, on its own it is unlikely to produce full resilience to disinformation in the garb of news. This is because humans engage communications not only with their heads, but also with their hearts. Hence, MIL also needs to include attention to raising awareness amongst individuals about how they respond to content in news, and their predispositions to give credence or not to information even independently of the signals of the genre.

MIL therefore should, at root, give individuals insight into their own identity – who they are, and who they are becoming, and how this affects their engagement with news and other kinds of communications. This module aims to help participants recognise and distinguish journalism on the one hand and information that purports to be journalism on the other. Such empowerment enables individuals to be masters of their own identity and to recognise and resist when they are being manipulated in relation to disinformation masquerading as news.

¹²¹ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/media-and-information-literacy> [accessed 16/06/2018].

The participants will learn how to develop and use the critical thinking skills framework of “Purposeful Reflective Judgment”¹²² which involves using analysis, interpretation, evaluation, self-regulation, inference and explanation.

Participants are put through the paces of analysing news in print, broadcast (radio and television), online and social media, deconstructing messages into their component parts, as well as learning about sources and their credibility (or the lack thereof).

They will learn that authentic news is not science, but embedded in narratives which, despite being diverse, do generally adhere to professional methods and ethics which help to reduce mistakes and which certainly eschew fabrication. Journalists should report on, and signal, lies expressed by various actors; conversely they should never accept claims as facts, nor present them without providing the accompanying qualifications that inform the audience about the actual situation.

In this module, students will also learn how quick and easy it is to exploit “journalese” to produce an apparently credible and convincing story out of incomplete, misleading, or invented details.¹²³

Teaching materials for this module focus on raising awareness about the importance of MIL in tackling misinformation and disinformation. This includes the use of critical thinking skills to detect ‘news’ that has been fabricated. It also highlights the significance of participants exercising their own MIL in their daily lives. It helps them see how MIL can reinforce their human rights and those of others; and the importance of avoiding promoting and disseminating untruths.¹²⁴

Teaching takes place in a computer-equipped, Internet-connected learning space. Participants may use their personal mobile devices’ online chat applications during the practical segments of the lesson. The Internet is needed for accessing off-campus online sources while access to a campus Intranet (where this module is offered at tertiary level) is used to access the library and any other on-campus dedicated information resource centres.



Outline

Disinformation disguised as news emanating from the U.S., French, Kenyan, and German elections in 2016 and 2017 is just the tip of the iceberg of a great many information

122 Facione, P. (2010, updated). *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. [online] Insight Assessment. Available at: <https://www.insightassessment.com/> [accessed 01/02/2018].

123 For examples of “journalese” consider: Fluent in Journalese by Philip B. Corbett. March 17, 2015 <https://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/2017/fluent-in-journalese/>; My ‘shameful secret’: I’ve learnt to love clichéd journalese by Rob Hutton. 05 Sep 2013. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/10288967/My-shameful-secret-lve-learnt-to-love-cliched-journalese.html> [both accessed 22/04/2018].

124 The integration of MIL in journalism education is studied by for example Van der Linde, F. 2010. The necessity of a media literacy module within journalism or media studies curricula. *Global Media Journal, African Edition*. Vol 4, no.2 <http://globalmedia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/7>

challenges to societies – although perhaps with greatest potential consequence. Consider, however, that television stations and social media users around the world tracked in real time a miracle in the making in Mexico in 2017 as rescuers tried to free a schoolgirl, #FridaSofía, trapped in rubble after an earthquake – only to find she did not exist¹²⁵. The story was false, though not perhaps a case of deliberate fakery. Yet journalism has to avoid both the mistaken and the counterfeit. Not all falsehood in news is ‘fake news’ in the sense of disinformation, but both are problematic for the ability of society to understand the world.

Users of news need sophisticated media and information literacy in general but also a degree of philosophical understanding. For instance, they should grasp that authentic news does not constitute the full “truth” (which is something only approximated in human interactions with each other and with reality over time). Participants, and journalism students especially, should nevertheless understand that the point is that journalism ought never to perpetuate what is false. Sightings of whales and sharks in people’s pools or backyards following hurricanes and other improbable side effects of natural disasters covered by the media beg the question: *Really?* News that fails to deliver on its implied respect for verified facts can be a result of sloppy reporting and inadequate publishing processes, but it can also be deliberately deceptive and therefore fraudulent. MIL is needed to decipher the difference, and how such cases compare to professional and ethical news.

The road is long. Rising levels of hate speech, xenophobia and attacks on refugees or people from “other” religions, ethnicities, and of different skin colour, based on stereotypes stoked by concocted statistics, populist rhetoric, and misleading media reports that fail to meet the standards of journalism, add to the toxic mix which MIL needs to counter. This will rapidly become even more complicated as computer programmes using Artificial Intelligence (AI) are used to create simulations of people in phoney video and/or audio reports that have no basis in truth.¹²⁶

Enter the need for guiding students and practitioners of journalism to think critically about what they hear and see, from the simplest conversation to the most widely disseminated news in traditional and digital multimedia.

In addition to the types of disinformation and misinformation identified by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017)¹²⁷, the Brussels-based, non-profit organisation European Association for Viewers’ Interests (EAVI), within the context of its Media Literacy for Citizenship

125 Campoy, A. (2017). *A schoolgirl trapped in Mexico’s earthquake rubble won the world’s hearts – except she did not exist*. Quartz. Available at: <https://qz.com/1084105/a-schoolgirl-trapped-in-mexicos-earthquake-rubble-won-the-worlds-hearts-except-she-didnt-exist/> [accessed 03/04/2018].

126 Edmund, C. (2017). *This AI can create a video of Barack Obama saying anything*. [online] World Economic Forum. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/obama-speech-simulation-washington-university?>

127 See Module Two

programme, has produced a handy infographic called “Beyond Fake News: Ten Types of Misleading News” that summarises what news consumers face today.¹²⁸ It is a valuable resource for journalism students and practitioners.

Dr Peter A. Facione’s updated research paper “*Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*”¹²⁹ is a good launch pad for students to acquaint them with “reasoning, decision-making, and effective individual and group thinking processes”. It is all the more relevant in the age of ‘post-truth’, ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’. In this approach, critical thinking includes:

- ▶ Inquisitiveness about a wide range of issues
- ▶ Concern to become and remain well-informed
- ▶ Alertness to opportunities to use critical thinking
- ▶ Trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry
- ▶ Self-confidence in one’s own abilities to reason
- ▶ Open-mindedness regarding divergent worldviews
- ▶ Flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions
- ▶ Understanding of the opinions of other people
- ▶ Fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning
- ▶ Recognising and honestly facing one’s own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, or egocentric tendencies
- ▶ Prudence in suspending, making or altering judgments
- ▶ Willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted

According to various studies, in many parts of the world young people’s engagement with mobile devices¹³⁰ means they get most of their news through these machines via chat applications (apps), social media, and, occasionally, traditional media websites

128 EAVI. (2018). EAVI.eu. [online] Available at: <https://eavi.eu/beyond-fake-news-10-types-misleading-info>

129 Facione, P. (2010, updated). Ibid. *Critical Thinking*.

130 *Children’s use of mobile phones*. (2015). [ebook] Tokyo: Mobile Society Research Institute, NTT Docomo.

Available at: https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/GSMA_Childrens_use_of_mobile_phones_2014.pdf

and blogs.^{131 132 133} On many of these, there is little or nothing to flag what is reputable journalism and what is amateur reportage, let alone what is disinformation.

Another issue is how the platforms treat news. For Facebook, the biggest social platform by far, “...journalism has been a pain in the neck from day one. Now, bogged down with the insoluble problems of fake news and bad PR, it’s clear that Facebook will gradually pull the plug on news”, argues Frederic Filloux.¹³⁴ How that plays out remains to be seen. Some news organisations would feel let down if the plug is pulled, saying their audiences would be short-changed, as Facebook has been a conduit for users who depend on the social media platform to keep abreast of events.¹³⁵ But some MIL proponents hope such a move might lead young news consumers to expand their horizons in search of what is happening in the world around them and not rely entirely on social media, with its information pollution, and being fed effortlessly through their ‘always on’ devices. At the same time, there are some suggestions that Facebook may even get into news production itself, competing with existing media actors.¹³⁶

With MIL, participants can learn to recognise that even authentic news is always constructed and consumed within wider narrative frameworks which give meanings to facts, and which implicate broader assumptions, ideologies and identities. This means the ability to recognise the difference between diverse journalistic attempts to capture and interpret salient reality on the one hand, and on the other, instances of deception that exploit the format of news while violating professional standards of verifiability.

MIL can also be a tool to combat stereotyping and promote cross-cultural communication, with multilingualism being a significant factor in attaining that goal. Various actors have contributed to the MIL effort, and good resources can be found on UNESCO’s website.¹³⁷ But much still needs to be done through curricula, and in practice, to dull the blow of disinformation and misinformation.¹³⁸

131 *Digital News Report (2017)*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism’s (RISJ, Oxford)
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_o.pdf

132 Shearer, E. & Gottfried, J. (2017). *News Use Across Social Media Platforms*. [ebook] Washington DC: Pew Research Centre. Available at:
<http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/>

133 *Youth, Internet, and Technology in Lebanon: A Snapshot (2017)* Social Media Exchange. Available at
<https://smex.org/youth-internet-and-technology-in-lebanon-a-snapshot/>

134 Filloux, F. (2018). *The Monday Note*, 14 January, 2018.
Available at: <https://mondaynote.com/facebook-is-done-with-quality-journalism-deal-with-it-afc2475f1f84>

135 See Module Three

136 Is Facebook’s Campbell Brown a Force to Be Reckoned With? Or Is She Fake News?
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/technology/facebook-campbell-brown-news.html>

137 See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/media-development/media-literacy/mil-as-composite-concept/>
[accessed 22/04/2018].

138 Abu-Fadil, M. (2007). *Media Literacy: A Tool to Combat Stereotypes and Promote Intercultural Understanding*.
Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001611/161157e.pdf> [accessed 01/04/2018].

To achieve impact with this module, the ubiquity of video can be capitalised upon to engage with participants by using short, captioned videos¹³⁹ as a form of MIL “edutainment” to feature false messages, challenge learners to find their own examples of misleading material, and accustom them to take every bit of content, including that presented as news, with a very large grain of salt.

Instructors should also help participants revise their tendency to superficially “Google” for most information by initiating deeper online searches, including advanced search functions, cross-checking multiple sources of information, and understanding the value of libraries and librarians in building literacies concerning the searching for and evaluating of information.¹⁴⁰ E-libraries have made it much easier to access scholarly and other references that journalism students and practising journalists can use to deepen their knowledge of processes and practices towards critically assessing and verifying information. Other resources also complement the learning/knowledge process to help participants enter the fraudulent news fray, guard against its negative impact, and be positioned to debunk it as part of doing journalism.¹⁴¹

Civic engagement with social media users who receive and share disinformation and misinformation is also a promising method for journalists and journalism students to learn how to find, track and effectively disprove falsehoods both for themselves and in their communities. Instructors are encouraged to consider exercises in this regard for this module.

The words of Rouba El Helou, Senior Media Lecturer and Researcher, Notre Dame University – Lebanon, are useful to consider the relevance of this module: “Equipping people with the skills needed to decode various messages is an ongoing struggle that media educators and journalists are all asked to join. Media Literacy helps people to find an equilibrium between trust of news sources and the necessary suspicion to question them”.

¹³⁹ Here is an example of video used powerfully to demonstrate the value of news media literacy in the context of US school shootings from Vice Media: Hoaxers say victims of mass shootings are ‘crisis actors’, Vice Select on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/vicenews/videos/842904982564160/> [accessed 01/04/2018].

¹⁴⁰ *15 resources for teaching media literacy*. ASCD. Available at <http://inservice.ascd.org/15-resources-for-teaching-media-literacy/>. [accessed 03/04/2018].

¹⁴¹ An example is Project Look Sharp, a media literacy initiative of Ithaca College, which has media literacy guides, curriculum kits and downloadable handouts. www.projectlooksharp.org. [accessed 23/03/2018].

Module Aims

This module aims to:

- ▶ Underscore the importance of acquiring the requisite literacies¹⁴² and implicated skills¹⁴³ to understand journalism (and various journalism variants) and at the same time detect both flawed journalism as well as fraudulent news in various media.
- ▶ Equip participants with the skills to unpack their consumption of news across the media spectrum and skills to see how easy it is to produce disinformation.
- ▶ Teach participants to develop a healthy scepticism towards all information they consume and how to weigh the veracity of reports, posts, feeds, photos, videos, audio content, infographics, and statistics within appropriate contexts.



Learning Outcomes

At the end of this module, students will be able to:

1. Distinguish fact from fiction as well as the legitimacy of potentially diverse narratives and stories within authentic journalism,
2. Understand how stories are selected, who produces the content, what methods are used to create the appearance of an authentic representation of reality, how language is used, what is emphasised, what is omitted, who is saying what, how important and/or reliable that person is, what his/her agenda may be, what impact that news had/has/will have, and how others view and consume the same news.
3. Have insight into their own MIL levels and the relevance of this to whom they are as individuals and how it interacts with their engagement with information and communication.



Module Format

The module is divided into two 90-minute sessions. The first session is theoretical and the second session is practical.

¹⁴² For information regarding media and information literacies see UNESCO's Notions of MIL <http://unesco.mil-for-teachers.unaoc.org/foreword/unifying-notions-of-media-and-information-literacy/> [accessed 22/4/2018].

¹⁴³ In addition to critical thinking skills identified by Facione (2010), participants should be encouraged to be sceptical; question everything; assume nothing; fact-check sources.

The methodology relies on discussion of what MIL means and its importance in an age of disinformation, misinformation and other distortions that go viral through traditional and social media. The materials for this class can be accessed through the Internet, and there are many useful resources for research and practical exercises.

Useful sites include:

- ▶ UNESCO <http://en.unesco.org/> and its Media Literacy site <https://en.unesco.org/themes/media-literacy>
- ▶ United Nations Alliance of Civilisations <https://www.unaoc.org/>
- ▶ Media and information literacy curriculum for teachers <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/media-and-information-literacy-curriculum-for-teachers/>
- ▶ 5 laws of MIL <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/media-development/media-literacy/five-laws-of-mil/>
- ▶ Common Sense Education <https://www.common sense.org/education/top-picks/media-news-and-information-literacy-resources-for-students>
- ▶ EAVI Media and Literacy for Citizenship <https://eavi.eu/beyond-fake-news-10-types-misleading-info/>
- ▶ The News Literacy Project <http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/>, the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University <http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>
- ▶ Mind over Media <http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/>
- ▶ The Digital Resources Center (Center for News Literacy) <http://drc.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>
- ▶ The Center for Media and Information Literacy at the University of Rhode Island <https://centermil.org/resources/>, to name a few

Instructors are encouraged to add resources from their respective countries and regions in different languages.

The classroom should be equipped with computers and access to the Internet allowing the instructor and students to examine websites of organisations involved in media and information literacy, along with media case studies.

Linking Plan to Learning Outcomes

A. Theoretical

The instructor will present materials and case studies on MIL and its relation to disinformation and misinformation that pose as news.

Module Plan	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Explain and discuss MIL and tools including critical thinking framework	45 mins	1 + 3
Review and discuss selected examples that are locally relevant in various media formats	45 mins	1 + 2

B. Practical:

Activities related to the learning materials and tools.

Module Plan	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Practical activities	90 mins	1 + 3
<p>Activity 1: Recognising journalism(s)</p> <p>Identify a front page story from the local press. Each student should research and examine the same story as it appeared in three different media outlets.</p> <p>Guide a discussion asking students to apply the technique of critical thinking. They should also unpack the underlying narrative, along with the framing, selection and packaging of news. This unpacking should give particular attention to the presence of the conventions of news (who, what, where, when, how, why elements; use of direct quotes; reliance on expert and authoritative sources, supportive images, stereotyped terminology typical to “journalese”, along with other ‘news-iness’ signals.</p>	45 mins	

<p>Activity 2: Presenting disinformation as news</p> <p>Show participants an example of fraudulent news and discuss what ‘works’ and what ‘gives the game away’. Then get students to manipulate the stories they have read in the previous exercise by creating a fraudulent story, set in the near future, which will have the prima facie appearance of news. (An alternative is for students to choose their own topic for their disinformation creation.)</p> <p>Once completed, the students form groups to assess what made the story look authentic. This could involve the use of an evaluation test , but it should also include identification of signifiers of news that have been exploited by the pieces.</p> <p>Re-group, and get the participants to share their insights via short presentations to the whole cohort.</p>	45 mins	1 + 3
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Suggested Assignment

Each individual should do a search of their respective social media feeds for a scientific or medical news story (e.g. a diet fad, the outbreak of a disease, the impact of global warming on their community, the efficiency of electric cars vs. fuel-operated vehicles). They assess their research, their confirmation bias (where active), and their emotional reactions to the story/perspectives on the issues, seeing how these relate to MIL issues such as search, evaluation, digital security, rights, and identity, along with the core ethical principles of news.

They should then provide information gained from their research about: who produced the story; how that reporter or person knows what was published, and if he/she stands to benefit from disseminating it; double check the data, statistics, infographics. If possible, students also make use of their university’s library/e-library to verify the data. They write up their findings in a 1500-word piece of media criticism, analysing the strengths, weaknesses, omissions and failings of the identified content.



Materials

Articles containing slides, pictures, and videos are listed below. Instructors are encouraged to create their own slideshows and include photos and videos relevant to their respective countries and contexts.



Reading

Abu-Fadil, M. & Grizzle, A. (2016). *Opportunities for Media and Information Literacy in the Middle East and North Africa*. Available at: <https://milunesco.unaoc.org/wp-content/uploads/MIL-Mena-2016-english.pdf> [accessed 05/01/2018].

A lexicon for the digital age. (2017). The Unesco Courier, [online] (July - September 2017). Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2017-july-september/lexicon-digital-age> [accessed 06/04/2018].

Facione, P. (2010). *Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts*. [online] Insight Assessment. Available at: <https://www.insightassessment.com/> [accessed 05/01/2018].

Gray, J., Bounegru, L. & Venturini, T. (2017). *What does fake news tell us about life in the digital age? Not what you might expect*. NiemanLab. [online] Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/04/what-does-fake-news-tell-us-about-life-in-the-digital-age-not-what-you-might-expect/> [accessed 06/04/2018].

Stephens, B. (2017). *The Dying Art of Disagreement*. The New York Times. [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/opinion/dying-art-of-disagreement.html> [accessed 06/04/2018].

Additional Reading

Lytvynenko, J. (2018). *Here's How A Canadian Imam Got Caught Up In Fake News About Houston*. BuzzFeed. [online] Available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/janelytvynenko/toronto-imam-caught-up-in-fake-news?bftw&utm_term=.ha3w9B5rr#.acEgmYE66 [accessed 06/04/2018].

Mulrooney Eldred, S. (2017). *In an era of fake news, students must act like journalists: schools rarely require news literacy, but it's more important than ever*. Science News. [online] Available at: <https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/era-fake-news-students-must-act-journalists> [accessed 06/04/2018].

Rusbridger, A., Neilsen, R. and Skjeseth, H. (2017). *We asked people from all over the world how journalists should cover powerful people who lie. Here is what they said*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/we-asked-people-all-over-world-how-journalists-should-cover-powerful-people-who-lie> [accessed 12/06/2018]

Vesey-Byrne, J. (2017). *Bikini designer exposes why you shouldn't trust everything you see on Instagram*. The Independent. [online] Available at: <https://www.indy100.com/article/bikini-designer-instagram-before-after-karina-irby-7934006?amp> [accessed 06/04/2018].