

Manipulation and “hunt for attention” in social media: the media literacy response

Kristina Berksun

August 22, 2024 ·

Vytautas Magnus University professor **Auksė Balčytienė** about the results of the comparative media literacy study presented at the 5th **European Social Survey (ESS)** international conference held in Lisbon on July 8-10.

Annoyance as a companion to digital communication: is it worth getting angry?

We are used to saying that we live in a society of increased speed and even information overload. While it is not appropriate to attribute all the characteristics of contemporary global and networked life to technological developments and innovations that are upsetting the social order that has not yet been established in society since the discovery of information, it is important to pay attention to, and to look more closely at, not the innovations themselves, and the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from their applications, but to try to get to know oneself better through those discoveries.

Conflict, disputes, misunderstandings and irritation seem to be among the most prominent attributes of modern information life. Every time we log on to a popular social information media, we find ourselves caught up in a whirlwind

of misunderstandings of greater or lesser calibre and, more often than not, in an all-out conflict.

In digital networks, absolutely all content producers are involved in the “attention hunt” for consumers. It seems as if we should not be too angry or lose faith in the public value of the information that reaches us. Everyone will admit that interactive platforms offer obvious advantages: broadening horizons, research, following experts and continuous education. However, there is a need for a legal stop and a strong response to any contagion that seeks to oppose and undermine. So how can we learn to understand and recognise the real motives behind information?

Information on social media cannot stand still. It has to be constantly changing and moving. This is where the deep intrigue of the social media lies. For content creators, the ‘circulation’ of information to be economically successful, i.e. to capture and retain attention, it requires a user who is sensitive to the ‘bait’. The circulation and production of content in social media is fundamentally different from the principles and professional ethics of accountable communication that guide classical media professionals. Meanwhile, social media can be dominated by easy bait, such as the usual tabloid “culture”, such as the behind-the-scenes lives of popular figures, local and national political sparks, echoes of a global conflict, or otherwise authentically extracted content. Thus, the production of any content – even the most civically relevant and of the highest quality – is indeed accompanied not only by a ritual of content, but also by a ritual of “attention production”: communicators, marketers, politicians, creative people and other participants in the information life are concerned with frustration.

How to find consensus and cultivate the capacity for respectful coexistence?

However active, dynamic, inclusive and evolving the source of such information may be, it often brings innovative and even proactive renewal to established traditions. The possibilities for communication and representation that are opening up are clearly empowering. Such developments provide an incentive to push the boundaries of the concept of media literacy and to talk about “multiliteracy”, i.e. what in a media environment would be the cultivation of a range of civic and intercultural communication skills that reinforce values. On the other hand, the algorithmically induced polarisation of groups, increasingly radical attitudes, the emergence of non-political focal points and other ills that emerge against the background of information provoke a search for deeper causes of the conflicts and the erosion of contemporary everyday life than just the fight against the consequences. In this situation, i.e., by studying conflicts, inappropriate and aggressively radical communication, we can discover, if not answers to the content that divides and fractures society, at least anticipate further lines of enquiry towards what it would really take for public differences of opinion not to turn into blatant hatreds and ever-smouldering cultural wars.

The question of how to find consensus and respectful coexistence between groups with different values is clearly a larger interdisciplinary research challenge. But taking small steps can lead to some more interesting discoveries. Could a media literacy approach be a way to create a more open but also more focused society? How could this be concretely applied to the formulation of a specific learning objective?

We already know that media literacy competences cover a wide range of competences, from critical media consumption, to active checking of

information sources, to the production of quality content. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about what is at the heart of 'information immunity'. Perhaps active consumption of information, responsible scrutiny of information, criticality and scepticism are important skills, but are they not a sufficient condition for a civic and manipulation-proof society? Perhaps something more is needed?

Why does it make sense to look for differences?

The research planned to test the ideas is based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a public survey conducted in 2020, just after the end of the global pandemic. The focus was on respondents answers to a question that directly addresses conspiratorial thinking: respondents were asked whether they 'agree'/'disagree' with the following statements: *'Scientific groups manipulate, falsify or suppress evidence to deceive the public'*, with the following response options: 1) strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) neither agree nor disagree; 4) disagree; 5) strongly disagree.

Based on the answers received, respondents were divided into three groups: those who believe in conspiracies (TC), those who are indifferent to conspiracies (IC), and those who do not believe in conspiracies (NC).

The survey revealed that Finns are the least likely to believe in conspiracies among the European countries surveyed: the TC (14.6%), the IC (19.3%), and the NC (66.1%). Lithuanians are much more numerous than Finns in this group, although slightly fewer than in the other countries, but there are clearly more undecided: TC (25.3%), IC (31.7%), NC (43.0%).

Taking Finland as a country of reflection and seeing what achievements it is appropriate to focus on, we can also raise questions about the importance of

other factors (age, education, social status, place of residence, value preferences) when we consider information choices and the values prevailing in society.

Who is closer to conspiratorial thinking?

The data shows that there are clear differences between those who support conspiratorial thinking (TC) and those who clearly do not, i.e. those who do not believe in conspiracies (NC) or those who are undecided (IC).

The Lithuanian NC group has a high level of interest and a desire to keep up to date with news and information on the internet. In Lithuania, these indicators are significantly higher than in Finland. The active use of digital tools (online information) and following the news indicates the need to stay up-to-date.

In such a situation, it could be argued that various biases will play a decisive role in deciding what to rely on – prejudices, the opinion of your closest circle of friends, and what is reassuring. These are the steps that Lithuanian respondents who tend to believe in conspiracy narratives (TCs) are characterised by: a long duration of internet use, high news consumption play a decisive role in forming and consolidating beliefs.

Also, TC respondents in Lithuania are characterised by a higher level of dissatisfaction and distrust in institutions. TC respondents are less likely to believe that the media is free to criticise the government. In Lithuania, this indicator is radically different from what we see in Finland. Also, unlike in Finland, greater openness and consideration for others is lacking among all groups of respondents in Lithuania.

The survey results show that TC respondents in Lithuania have a very strong tendency to make their own decisions. It could be argued that they are rigid –

stubborn and reluctant to change their beliefs quickly. Although their age ranges, these respondents are less educated, have a lower social status and live in a region of the country.

These observations echo other research findings, where expressions of scepticism and mistrust of authority can influence and contribute to conspiratorial thinking. It is also important to bear in mind that scepticism and rigidity may be the result of specific attitudes formed by other factors (education, socio-economic status), or may be the expression of a cognitive style rather than a value.

On discovery: where to start changing?

Media education-oriented interventions can be successful in introducing *self-efficacy-oriented* learning. Educators should focus not only on cognitive issues, i.e. what is involved in the specific knowledge of the media environment, but also on socio-psychological and neurobiological factors, such as expressions of self-reactions that lead to automaticity in decision-making but not to critical thinking. Developing respect and consideration for those with a different point of view could also be one of the objectives of developing exercises for media literacy training.