

Do you know the Frankenbite? Media Literacy on the power of story and editing

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the hybridization of information and entertainment into infotainment in legacy and social media, plus technical innovations from deep fakes to AI, have escalated the challenge of upholding ethical principles in media creation. Our media literacy curriculum for high school students addresses the prevalence of fictional storytelling in fact-based media. Our goal is to guide students as media consumers to understand and explore the ways in which picture editors alter facts to favour story, and to decipher fact from fiction in audiovisual media. However, the responses and feedback we received after two trial years revealed a disturbing general mistrust of students in all media, questioning of any empirical facts and established science. This article explores this fundamental epistemic dilemma in teaching media literacy, leading to a crisis in society. We are experiencing a shift in the media landscape as dramatic as the transition from oral to written storytelling.

Keywords: *fake news; media literacy; storytelling; editing.*

1. The view from the Cutting Room

The general objective and specific objectives of this paper is to report what television makers do when very little happens in the real. The answer is picture editors go to work. With the frankenbite (Fig. 1)– a portmanteau of “Frankenstein” and “soundbite” – one flip creates conflict where there was none before.

When I first learned about the frankenbite, I assumed its use was limited to Reality TV; I was engaged in documentary – what scholar Bill Nichols calls “a discourse of sobriety” (Nichols, 1991). But when I began to critically analyze my own practices, I realized that I too sacrificed the real and “lied the truth” for a better story. The longing for narrative structure, regardless of genre, demands a multitude of choices, both in the recording and in the editing of fact-based reporting. A documentary film shows what “happens in front of the camera,” but only after the



Figure 1. The Frankenbite. Source: termwiki, no date

deliberate selection and ordering of captured reality. The editing of pictures and sounds is the most significant indicator of a media creator's point of view: what is included, left out, juxtaposed, compared, and the order in which the information is placed. All reveal what the creator considers crucial and propels even nonfiction toward the conclusion the maker has pre-determined. The audience, therefore, is presented not with *the real*, but an interpretation of reality as determined by media makers. Even so, picture editing remains on the margins of media scholarship and largely invisible to media consumers. If the audience *does* notice the editing, their attention is drawn away from the narrative and emotion of the program, hampering their engagement with the intended meaning of the story. This paper will offer two conflicting appearances of narratives, suggest a method to protect media consumers from fake news, report on the outcomes of our research, and discuss key take aways.

2. On Story and Anti-Story

Humans are perpetual storytellers in and of our own lives – we see our lives as a journey, with a beginning, middle, and an end. Roland Barthes positioned narrative as one of the great cognitive categories through which humans understand the world. Without story, humanity would experience life as a blooming, buzzing confusion. Storytelling even pervades academic fields traditionally held to be governed by logic, syllogism, or formula, such as history – the writing of which Hayden White's *Metahistory* (White, 1973) equates with literature– or law and the social sciences. Yet, analysis of narrative practice has not kept pace with its proliferation and celebration in culture.

In recent times, society has delegated an ever-larger portion of its essential storytelling function to legacy media, and now increasingly, social media, where facts are regularly manipulated to create more compelling stories. *Who* tells stories and *how* they are told have fundamentally turned in a direction opposite to enlightenment, and toward profitability and ideology. Our research is grounded in the belief that stories are increasingly destructive, and have permeated the non-fiction media landscape where narratives are now valued more than facts.

The recent phenomenon of “fake news” is the result of a collective attachment to narrative coherence over factual reality. The rise of upon a public that behaves according to emotion rather than rational thought. Neil Postman (Postman and Postman, 2005) famously pointed to a tyranny of story in which we have come to “adore the technologies that undo [our] capacities to think.” The new media landscape has led to the emergence of “anti-stories,” defined as formulaic and fundamentalist narratives in fact-based mass media, serving the interests of corporate and political elites to sell products or agendas.

But the ability of media consumers to decipher fact from fiction on legacy and social media has not kept pace. The prevalence of media that purports to be fact-based but really just tells stories, coupled with a lack of tools to empower the new generation of media consumers to read and media, expose an urgent need for media literacy education. Our research team hypothesized that most youth do not currently have the critical skills necessary to discern fact from fiction in fact-based programs in legacy and social media. We further postulated a dramatic disconnect between the media studies content students currently engage with in school, the media platforms they engage with their peers, and the media landscape that informs their view of the world outside their own lived experience. We suggested two causes (and thus remedies) for this disconnect. First, student awareness of media does not consider its production and post-production processes. Second, students lack the access to “insider” knowledge regarding media content production, and while being media creators themselves, have not been given the agency of applying editing tools to create their own narratives. To address these gaps, we developed a resource called A Vaccine Against fake news.

3. A Vaccine Against Fake News

Audiences need the necessary tools to distinguish fact from fiction, data from story, and evidence from narrative tropes, in fact-based media. Recent research has shown that most American youth lack the capacity to discern truth from fiction in online news-based media. In Canada, 90 per cent of all citizens say they have fallen for fake news online, with 45 per cent listing television as the most common source of misleading reports. Therefore, we hypothesized that media users lack sufficient media literacy to give them agency as consumers. However, the responses we received from participants during the pilot phase of our research study challenge this assumption.

Hill (2007) defines media literacy as the viewer’s ability to analyze and respond to media with a critical distance and a degree of reflectivity about what is perceived. Thus, the study of fact-based programs needs to go beyond indexical concerns about objectivity, factuality, and truth claims. It needs to analyze spectatorship – audiences’ cognitive and affective perceptions of nonfiction’s mediated reality, in which the degree of mediation is as variable as a spectator’s

awareness of it. Civil society's challenge is to ensure that youth learn critical media literacy skills and build their capacities and knowledge to participate in democratic structures.

The theoretical framework underpinning the curriculum's design could clarify how our approach differs from or builds upon existing media literacy models. The resource we are testing, and the means through which we will collaborate with research participants, is a process of experiential learning. Experiential learning involves a cyclical process of knowledge building, knowledge application, and reflective observation (Kolb, 1983). In terms of Media Literacy-specific learning, we are influenced by the media literacy triangle, developed by Eddie Dick (Abreu, 2019). This approach is intended to guide conversations around media by looking at media from three vantage points: text, production, and audience. The central idea is that the text, its production, and its audience all combine to create meaning.

We are interested in the complex, contingent, and context-specific ways that youth negotiate their relationship to mass media. The debate on fake news has heightened, to a lesser degree, public awareness of the composed and mediated nature of television, specifically television programs that claim to give true accounts of everyday reality. As viewers become increasingly media literate, ever more aware of the tricks of the trade and constructed nature of objectivity and balance, we asked whether they will be able to build up a healthy skepticism to protect themselves from fact-based media that manipulates instead of informs, narrates instead of explains. Or will they develop a cynicism that questions or dismisses all fact-based media, whatever its source?

The instrumentalist view that media owners control media content, and that the media performs ideological functions, highlights the potential effects media has on individuals. But these effects also include complex combinations of long-term and short-term processes that audiences may actively negotiate themselves. Society is paying for its media illiteracy in the steady erosion of fact by narrative. This is where our research comes in. To respond to this challenge, we first needed to learn how students use media to construct a factual understanding of the world outside their own lived experience.

We partnered with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), one of the largest and most diverse school boards in North America, to ensure that the tool we developed would be relevant and accessible to a variety of cultural backgrounds. Exploring both the essential and dangerous qualities of narrative amidst hyperbolic technological change, *A Vaccine against fake news* came to draw on the insights of those who work with and think about story – picture editors. In user-determined focus groups, we asked students to create their own stories, applying specific video editing techniques. The process of creation had them describe, develop, and test the story, and thus provided educators with new strategies for teaching media literacy. Our aim for the pilot phase of our initiative was to conduct post-workshop surveys with the focus groups, review the resulting data, and then finalize an interactive, open access tool for media literacy education

in high school classrooms anywhere, using browser-based dynamic media creation that allows users to create nonlinear narratives in fact-based media. The survey responses we received, however, would raise fundamental questions about the purpose of media literacy in general and our approach in particular.

4. Outcome

As a mixed-methods action research project, we are ultimately “focused on the improvement of practice” (Merriam & Tisdell) in classrooms across Ontario. Our emphasis on action research means that we have a study design that will develop over time, based on our learning from previous phases. We conceive of it as “a spiral cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, action research also means that we engaged participants as co-investigators. Data analysis was conducted using an open coding process, which will allow for themes to emerge as we simultaneously collected and analyzed our data in an ongoing, iterative manner. We employed a constant comparative method of data analysis to identify key themes from our focus group field notes and survey respondents.

After two years of presentations in Toronto high schools, working with 20 media literacy teachers, curriculum leaders, principals and school librarians, and more than 400 students who responded to pre- and post-workshop surveys, we analyzed the collected data and formulated the following key take-aways. Among the English teachers who teach media literacy education, only one quarter expressed a *very comfortable* level of doing so, while more than 80 per cent of media literacy teachers confessed of having no experience creating media themselves.

Of these teachers, 70 per cent are *not* or are *just slightly* satisfied by the learning their students achieve in media education, and wish they had more time or access to better teaching resources. media literacy frameworks like Critical Media Literacy or the Digital Competency Framework. All of them declared that their students deserve better:

“I have always felt underprepared to teach media and that even though I discuss what we see and encourage students to question creator bias and think about the choices made in delivery of various media pieces, I only scratch the surface.”

The 400+ grade 10-12 students, which ranged in age from 14 to 18, from one of the most diverse school populations in North America, responded to both the pre- and post-workshop surveys did so with guaranteed anonymity. More than 50 per cent of the pre-workshop survey respondents said they had little awareness of how fact-based programs are created.

In the post-workshop survey, students reported an increase in their awareness of how nonfiction media is created from less than 50 per cent to 90 per cent. Student’s trust in what they watch and hear on screen *always* or *often* dropped to 22 per cent, from 40 per cent in the pre-workshop survey.

5. Key Take Aways

The one main takeaway from the pilot phase of our workshops pertains not only to the delivery of A Vaccine Against fake news but the very purpose of our project. From the beginning, we had postulated that the fake news problem cannot be fixed at a systems level but only by empowering individual media consumers and creators. The information environment is built on telecommunication infrastructures and services developed following free-market ideology, where “truth” or “fact” are useful when commodified as market products. Controlling media “noise” is therefore less a technological problem than a human problem, a problem of belief and ideology. Agency for sifting fact from fiction, we believed, has to remain with the receiver of information.

However, post-workshop comments from participants in A vaccine against fake News strongly suggest another – different – impact. Increased awareness of the way fact-based media is created doesn’t empower a healthy skepticism but gives room to cynicism:

“The media is becoming less and less real and reliable. With media being such a huge part of today’s society its almost scary.”

“Although something may seem to be completely real on TV, it’s often not. People just want to keep viewers engaged, so they’ll achieve that by editing and changing the truth. There are a lot of lies.”

“Almost nothing is genuine on the media. False news that are spread are assumed and posted to be very believable.”

“I understand how even the simplest parts of the media are manipulated to elicit a specific reaction from viewers.”

“Although something may seem to be completely real on tv, it’s often not. People just want to keep viewers engaged, so they’ll achieve that by editing and changing the truth. There are a lot of lies.”

These sobering statements address a fundamental question: How can media consumers find and apply accurate information that contributes to understanding large social and political problems? There is a growing deficit in society of commonly accepted facts and common cultural ground. The result becomes a question of epistemology itself. The real danger of fake news is less media consumers believing the *wrong* thing – inaccurate information – than it is doubting that the right or correct thing is true. If these students’ question everything, all the time, does it matter if their source of information is QAnon, which weaponizes narrative to an absurd degree, or *The New York Times*, “all the news that is fit to print”?

The effect of the perception that nothing is genuine on the media has already led many citizens to declare the epistemological bankruptcy of legacy and social media. It is sobering to read how the vice of epistemic obstruction in contemporary habits of media consumption influence the relationship of media consumers to the real. Is it belief systems, not truths, that cement identities and make sense of the complexity of being? Belief in ungrounded things, both sacred and profane, existed long before fake news. But now, media consumers have become increasingly suspect of *all* news sources outside of their echo chambers of comfort; the entrenchment of mistrust makes people more and more likely to deem any source outside these chambers as “news.”

If not through media literacy, then, how are young people to cope with the contemporary tsunami of information? As a result of feedback from student participants, we have decided to dedicate the final of the three workshops to an open-ended discussion about the impact of our media literacy approach on the level of mistrust that students experience. If cynicism or even fatalism is a widespread response to the workshops, can our media literacy approach be redeemed? Is A Vaccine for fake news an antidote to the epistemic crisis created by media manipulation or does it contribute to it? The experience, data and responses from the next phase of our work with students will suggest an enhanced perspective on this knotted question.

This is more of a paper on a work-in-progress than a report on results. For 2025- 2027, the workshops will continue in Toronto, as well as high schools in Germany, Sweden, Finland, the US and Brazil. Based on the dirth of new insights and results promise rich research results at the end.

One response from a student participant in our workshops will provide a good discussion starter. They simply appropriated our paradigm and turned its language right back on us:

“Will these researchers take our opinions and twisting them to a certain narrative to prove the[ir] study?”

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