Civic engagement in the twenty-first century

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Disinformation and audience fragmentation pose major questions for the future of the public sphere. Media literacy is increasingly being seen as one response. But what precisely is to be taught? Central to one media literacy project in Croatia is giving voice to migrants and refugees.

In the late summer of 2015, newspapers, web portals, TV and radio programmes were flooded with news of the ‘unexpected’ wave of refugees attempting to enter the European Union. First, they were going from Turkey to Greece, then across Macedonia and Serbia, Bulgaria and Hungary. When the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán closed his country’s borders, intimating he would build a wall, a project of insanity – as if walls can stop people – refugees were redirected towards Croatia.

In those early days we were able to follow the movement of people through our country live in the media. We also tracked how the government reacted. Mostly, we were pleased with the humanity shown by officials, the organization of the police and the infrastructure provided by the state, as well as with the behaviour of citizens in preparing food, sanitary goods, clothes and necessities; all those things that people, deprived of home and security, need most in their search for a safer future. Whether the response of state representatives was encouraged by the upcoming elections, or by pure humanitarian motives, is up for debate; but from today’s perspective it doesn’t seem important. What we remember are the images of police officers holding children in their arms and taking care of them. What we listen to and watch now are new reports of the deaths of refugees in their attempt to cross borders, and of violence and racist backlash.

In the autumn of 2015, the Croatian media were broadly aligned in their support of refugees and launched initiatives to provide them with help, supporting campaigns by Refugees Welcome, Are You Syrious?, Jesuit Refugee Service and the like. The national context should be kept in mind: Croatia is a small and homogeneous culture with few minority members – mostly historical – and the fluidity of the population is limited. The whole former Yugoslav region is intertwined by ethnic, national, and religious tensions that rise and fall depending on the political constellation in each country. Although the last war, provoked by the dissolution of Yugoslavia, ended almost twenty-five years ago, in the past few years it has seemed as if the war hasn’t ended, or is threatening to start
up again. Somehow, we haven’t managed to grow beyond this conflict.

The great contradiction is our capacity to remain preoccupied with the legacies of the war, while remaining oblivious to the sufferings of people who have faced similar experiences and face a similar fate. The legacy of conflict has been to keep the former Yugoslav states as closed cultures with poor economies and dim prospects for the future. This reality has made Croatia, like the other countries in the region, a passageway rather than a destination for refugees. The small number of asylum seekers that have found their way to Croatia indicates that, compared to larger and more diverse states in the EU, we have underdeveloped programmes for integration and a lack of multiculturalism.

To state some facts: since the introduction of the programme for asylum seekers and subsidiarity protection in 2006, Croatia has granted 739 international protection claims; of these claims, 600 were granted asylum and 139 subsidiarity protection. Although the number of claims granted has increased substantially in the past few years, Croatia remains restrictive in its approval of international protection in comparison to other EU members. Additionally, because of its poor integration system, it is less desirable as a country of destination. As a result, migration and refugees lack visibility in the country’s media, whether as subjects of discussion or voices listened to. Migrants are represented in stereotypical and predictable ways; and when migration is discussed, it is only in relation to scandals, breaches of rights, felonies and violence. In the radical rightwing media, the picture is even worse. Refugees are represented as a threat – to national security and social stability, to culture and to religious identity. These reports usually rely on questionable sources, hiding publishers and authors. They are often carried by media with a reputation for fake news.

Fake news. Disinformation. Fact checking. We encounter these buzzwords whenever we discuss journalism today. As a separate branch of journalism, fact checking sounds to me like a red alert. I liked to think that it was the starting point of all journalism rather than something specialized. Well, this is where we find ourselves – the picture of decline is clearly drawn.

Fake news is intentionally distorted information published in media, blogs and social networks with the aim of deceiving and manipulating the public. It is usually built on partially correct and credible information, but these stories often disguise or hide their sources, which makes it harder to fact-check them. As a rule, fake news has one main advantage over factual information: its ability to address the emotions of its audience. This is why fake news is able to pollute the media landscape so efficiently.

The statement that the traditional media have reached the point of no return is a valid one, and yet it has been made many times before, without consequence. The media are still here, news is being produced, new platforms emerge, the number of new outlets keeps increasing. So, when considering the state of the media today, what can we consider to be different from moments of crisis in the past?

First of all, when we talk about media in a traditional sense, we continue to think about newsrooms and outlets that have a major impact on society, political dynamics and public opinion. However, younger generations simply do not read newspapers, they do not watch central television news programmes, or to put it simply: they do not consume and
perceive the media in the same way that previous generations did. We do not necessarily know, nor can we foresee, how the traditional media will change or transform in the decades to come.

Famously, the emergence of radio was considered as a threat to newspapers, just as the emergence of television was considered a threat to radio; the internet, of course, was considered as the fatal blow to all media – and yet none of these formats have died. What happened instead was a fundamental change of structure. Each new media format has altered the way news and content have been produced, placed and advertised; and none more so than the internet, which has transformed our consumption of media from something linear to something completely non-linear. Indeed, the emergence of radio and radio formats over the past few years was enabled by digital technologies. Today, audio books are the fastest growing segment of the digital publishing market, while e-books are taking an increasingly larger share of the publishing sector. At the same time, the market for printed books is also growing. YouTube channels, YouTubers and social media influencers often gain bigger audiences than traditional outlets, without these having ceased to exist.

Drawing the landscape in this way gives us a blurry image of the future of the media, and of society in a broader sense. Fake news is polluting media in all their forms and appearances; fragmentation and specialization is dispersing its audience and impact. Fundamentally, the only way to arm ourselves against this shifting and uncertain future is to look to new forms of media literacy. Today, media literacy is gaining more and more relevance, and has been recognized on the political level. But what is to be taught and how?

From 2013 onwards, the Croatian organisation Kulturpunkt has been running a media literacy module as part of its journalism training programme. The programme is aimed at young writers and journalists who wish to gain a better insight into contemporary cultural and artistic practices. The arts have always had the capacity to reflect on the contemporary moment, to detect the flaws and vulnerabilities of the time, to anticipate future currents and offer diverse perspectives. We focus on emergent, engaged and critical practices that can be seen as a prism through which to consider society and the processes that evolve within it.

Alongside lectures in contemporary culture and arts, we offer lectures exploring the framework and dynamics defining the media. The programme segment dedicated to media literacy introduces students to the structures of the media and the transformations they are experiencing, how content production has changed, the different forces shaping pressure on journalism, and market and political influences. An important part of the module relates to critical reading, understanding how media operate, how they place information and for what reason. Especially nowadays, with the increase in fake news, distorted representations and biased reporting, critical competences are essential.

The problem is that so much of the news remains shaped by traditional perspectives. Today we need something else. The more knowledge we acquire, the more important it seems to approach media literacy in a completely different way. The Lost in Media project attempted to do precisely that – to consider all possible aspects of media literacy and more. To educate, to better understand the media system, to involve a wide range of
media formats, and where possible to encourage youth to use them, to create their own language, to produce their own content, to share, distribute, and participate.

We can’t necessarily influence big media systems, and it shouldn’t even be our aim to transform the giants, especially with such limited resources and capacities. If we instead focus on the small scale, we can have a big impact. Giving voice to migrants and refugees, to the marginalized and deprived, primarily by offering them tools and skills, is one possibility. As we look out on an increasingly uncertain age, it is clear that the skills of the journalist are now the skills of the good citizen. Media literacy is necessary for true civic engagement in the coming century.

Combatting fake news, manipulation and distortion will remain the main goal of the media in the foreseeable future, and in that battle audiences and readerships will be the media’s main partners. We need media literacy to help us build a relationship with our audiences, to equip people with the knowledge and methods for detecting lies. Without a relevant and credible media, it is hard to imagine a functional and just democracy. Have we already been defeated? Many recent developments seem to point in that direction. But though we may have lost a battle, we have lost the war. We shouldn’t leave the field too soon, but rather think of new strategies for dealing with inequality and demand more democracy at all levels. The hope for our future is to be found in education, and in our communities. Communities in which everyone is a journalist.

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