Teaching in a "Post-Truth" World: Do Teachers and Students Need More Training in Media Literacy?

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Post-truth: Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

2016 proved to be a year where popular public opinions confounded traditional news media, pollsters and many others. The presidential election in the United States and the United Kingdom's "Brexit" vote serve as prime examples. One of the galvanizing forces underlying this increasing disconnect between public sentiment and traditional media has been the growing prevalence of online sources that report "news" meant to appeal to its audience without being bound by facts or evidence or research — news that simply must be true (to some) because it *feels right*.[1] This shift in the importance of verifiable truth as a basis for popular opinion led Oxford Dictionaries to select *Post-truth* as 2016's Word of the Year.

So what does it mean to be living in the era of post-truth? For starters, it means more responsibility on the shoulders of people who make use of media (i.e., everyone). First, as consumers of media content, individuals have a new responsibility to sort reliable information and credible sources from the questionable, the unreliable and the downright false information that may be masked as news for their consumption. Second, as producers of media in online spaces — whether through posting of tweets, blogs, photos or Facebook entries — individuals have a new responsibility to consider the impact of the content that they create or sponsor.

There is an important relationship between consuming and producing online media. Individuals don't tend to simply consume information, they pass it on — through retweets, likes and blog posts. Modern apps and technologies make this quick and simple.

For better or worse, when posting online, one effectively attaches one's name and reputation to the information being posted – regardless of whether the decision is made carefully and critically, or casually while ordering a double-double. This is where hazards arise for the young and inexperienced, or for any individual with limited media literacy.

When it comes to online media — no matter how small a circle one may intend to communicate with — one's potential audience is always the entire world. Take the infamous case of Justine Sacco, for example. While she was the head of communications at a major media conglomerate, Ms Sacco boarded a plane and posted a tweet that others considered racist and insensitive. Ms Sacco likely expected that her post would only be seen by her small group of followers. When her plane landed, the post had been retweeted thousands of times, #HasJustineLandedYet was trending worldwide on Twitter, and Ms Sacco was no longer head of communications. She had been fired.

For educators, the implications of new responsibilities arising from the online media landscape are significant.

According to the researchers behind a recent study conducted by Stanford University, the young people in modern classrooms may have significant difficulty assessing the truth of online content.[2] These researchers found that most elementary school students had trouble distinguishing articles from advertisements, and most university students had trouble identifying reasons why relying on information from fringe media or activist groups could be problematic. Discussing these findings in a recent interview, the researchers noted that "the kinds of duties that used to be the responsibility of editors, of librarians now fall on the shoulders of anyone who uses a screen to become informed about the world."[3] If left unaddressed, the researchers warn that the lack of basic media literacy uncovered by their study may become a "threat to democracy."

On the flip side of the coin — when it comes to producing online media — recent examples in Ontario illustrate that educators may also have important lessons to learn about modern media literacy. Michael Marshall, a Richmond Hill teacher, was terminated from his employment in 2015 after posting tweets with comments expressing his views on various identifiable groups– including statements that hijabs made him "sad," and ridiculing complaints against him with the hashtag #theycantbreathe.[4] Numerous community members found these postings highly offensive, racist, and exclusionary. These community members filed complaints to the school board, and the resulting investigation led to Mr. Marshall's termination.

More recently, Ghada Sadaka, Principal at Sir Wilfrid Laurier Public School in Markham, came under investigation following complaints that anti-Muslim content was posted to her Facebook account. These posts included a graphic stating that burkas should be banned in Europe if bikinis were banned in Muslim countries, and a link to an article on Ezra Levant's The Rebel website that purported to tell "the truth about refugees."[5] Ms. Sadaka has since issued an apology, stating that she had learned about how her posts had affected others around her and that she realized, upon reflection, that these posts "should not have occurred."[6] Ms. Sadaka announced in November 2016 that she would be on leave from her position until 2017.[7]

One significant concern that is evident in both Ms. Sadaka's apology and Mr. Marshall's online postings is their apparent lack of awareness or concern that (i) members of the communities they serve would see their postings; and (ii) some members of these communities could reasonably find these postings offensive and threatening. Being responsible for the education of children in increasingly diverse modern communities, the duties of educators — and principals in particular include facilitating inclusiveness in classrooms and in schools.

In an age of online media that makes it all too easy to "broadcast ourselves," educators' duties will increasingly entail using such media responsibly and literately. Moreover, as Stanford University's study bears out, students have a growing *need* to receive quality education in media literacy. If the media literacy of teachers is left in doubt, then the ability to fill this need will effectively be left to chance. As suggested by the public response to Ms. Sadaka's and Mr. Marshall's cases, the consequences to school boards of taking on such risks can be significant.

Professional bodies, such as the Ontario College of Teachers, have taken steps toward ensuring media literacy among their members by adopting a professional advisory on the Use of Electronic Communication and Social Media. This advisory, which was released on February 23, 2011, provides direction and guidance to ensure that educators in Ontario are informed of their responsibilities in online spaces. As set out in the advisory, these responsibilities are rooted in an awareness of what it means to engage in online communication in the first place:

Electronic messages are not anonymous. They can be tracked, misdirected, manipulated and live forever on the Internet. Social media sites create and archive copies of every piece of content posted, even when deleted from online profiles. Once information is digitized, the author relinquishes all control.

The use of the Internet and social media, despite best intentions, may cause members to forget their professional responsibilities and the unique position of trust and authority given to them by society. The dynamic between a member and a student is forever changed when the two become “friends” in an online environment.

Members should never share information with students in any environment that they would not willingly and appropriately share in a school or school-related setting or in the community.

The advisory states that there is a distinction between the professional and private life of teachers. Practitioners are individuals with private lives. However, off-duty conduct matters. The advisory asserts "sound judgment and due care should be exercised."

It confirms that teaching is a public profession. The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that teachers' off-duty conduct, even when not directly related to students, is relevant to their suitability to teach. The advisory states, "Members should maintain a sense of professionalism at all times — in their personal and professional lives."

As one of its key recommendations for educators, the advisory advises acting as a "digital citizen" to model appropriate online behaviour for students. This begins with classroom instruction but, as the examples above indicate, it does not necessarily end there. Ontario's elementary curriculum and its secondary English curriculum each require teachers to provide extensive lessons in media studies to their students. At the same time, online media renders teachers' own media literacy subject to public display and public scrutiny. This introduces a new and significant responsibility into the teacher's role as a media literacy instructor and as a "digital citizen" who uses their online acts to *educate.*

As a best practice, school boards can help put these principles into action by adopting written *acceptable use policies* setting out guidelines for the use of online and other

media. Such policies provide clarity, and ensure that educators are on the same page when it comes to translating the role of "digital citizen" into everyday actions and decisions. These policies may include information and instruction on:

- Means for ensuring privacy online;
- The limits of online privacy;
- Demonstrating empathy online;
- Netiquette and cyber-kindness; and
- Appropriate ways to integrate classroom materials and online materials (ie., putting lessons online *or* bringing existing online content into lessons).

Moreover, an acceptable use policy may provide a forum for educators to share their concerns over online media use, and to address issues collaboratively with administrators as they arise.

If we are indeed entering an era of *post-truth* news reporting, then teachers may be among the forefront of individuals responsible for providing tools to challenge the propagation of false information and assumptions — ensuring, in particular, that such information is not laundered through oblivious or uninformed acts of "reposting". For teachers who choose to participate in social media and broadcast themselves to the world, this responsibility weighs more heavily and necessarily extends beyond the classroom.

[1] See Tom Blackwell (4 Nov 2016) "The scourge of the U.S. election: Fake news, exploding on social media, is seeping into the mainstream,".

[2] Stanford History Education Group, "Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning," Executive Summary.

[3] Camila Domonoske, "Students have 'dismaying' inability to tell fake news from real, study finds,".

[4] See David Bateman (9 Sept 2015), " High school teacher fired after investigation into 'racist' tweets,".

[5] Noor Javed (6 Sept 2016), "Principal under investigation for anti-Muslim posts,".

[6] Noor Javed (6 Sept 2016), "Principal under investigation for anti-Muslim posts,".

[7] Noor Javed and Kristin Rushowy (28 Nov 2016), "Markham principal who apologized for anti-Muslim posts now on leave,".

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