Understanding and analysing online conspiracy theories and communities.

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Global Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Week Feature Conference
24-25 October 2018 Kaunas
Outline

- MIL and critical thinking
- Conspiracy theories
- Digital media
- Critical thinking
My trajectory

• 2013: “Pro-violence and anti-democratic messages on the internet” (Swedish media Council)
Quotes from the report

• Being recruited to and radicalised within the framework of proviolence and anti-democratic extremist groups is a question of adopting, more or less uncritically, an image of the world where hate is the driving force and violence the legitimate means.

• This fact places great demands on people young and old to retain a critical view of information and sometime sharply angled messages that we come across in both traditional and digital media.

• Trying to counteract each of these by itself is not meaningful, and the proposed measures are therefore at an overarching structural level, aimed at reinforcing individuals’ ability to critically evaluate and interpret media messages.

• The aim is to reinforce media users’ abilities to evaluate critically, to analyse and understand both online and offline material, to teach children and young persons to question and compare different information sources, to partake of independent investigations and to be able to evaluate texts, audio and image material.
6 KEYS TO CRITICAL THINKING

based on Bloom’s Taxonomy

Remember
- Retrieve relevant knowledge from long-term memory
- Recite the main ideas
- Tell the main idea

Analyze
- Separate a whole into its parts and determine their relationships
- Synthesize facts
- Relate facts to each other

Understand
- Construct meaning from instructional messages
- Identify the main idea
- Give a personal example

Apply
- Make a judgement based on criteria and standards
- Relate data
- Identify if there is enough evidence

Evaluate
- Give value judgments
- Decide which is more important
- Know how to judge

Create
- Combine elements or ideas to form a new whole
- Develop arguments
- Give your own example

The Critical Thinking Process

6 critical questions

Who said it?
- Someone you know? Someone famous?
- Does it matter who said it?

What did they say?
- Did they give facts or opinions?
- Did they have a point?

Where did they say it?
- In public or in private?
- Did others hear or see it?

When did they say it?
- Before, after, or during an important event?

Why did they say it?
- Did it reflect their opinions?
- Were they trying to make someone think or act?

How did they say it?
- Were they happy, sad, angry, or calm?
- Did their words match their tone?
Conspiracy theories

• Logical fallacy?
• Pathological? (paranoid personality)
• Conspiracy culture
  – “a radical and generalized manifestation of distrust that is deeply embedded in the cultural logic of modernity and is, ultimately, produced by ongoing processes of modernization in contemporary society”. (Aupers 2012: 24)
Furthermore…

• Conspiracist thinking encourages the individual to “think for themselves”, to be suspicious to authorities, not to take proposals at face value…

• i.e. the same things we ask our students to do?
Digital media

• Alternative facts
• Digital enclaves
• Group polarization
• Eco-chambers
• Filter bubbles
• Confirmation bias
Critical thinking

• Skill or disposition?
• General skill or subject-specific skill?
• Findings from a recent study (Nygren et al. 2018) seems to support the notion that critical thinking is a subject-specific skill.
MIL and critical thinking

• Critical thinking = central part of MIL definitions
• BUT: skill or disposition/attitude?
• If critical thinking is a subject-specific skill, what does it mean for MIL-promotion?
• How teach critical thinking about media without accidently confirming the conspiracy theory agenda?
Thank you!

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