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Paper Title Media Literacy During the Coronavirus Pandemic: Microethnography on Mass Media–Related Anxiety in American College Students

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Session Title Media Literacy in a Time of Crisis

Session Type Paper

Presentation Date 4/12/2021

Presentation Location Virtual

Descriptors Academic Outcomes, Literacy, Media

Methodology Qualitative

Unit SIG-Media, Culture, and Learning

DOI https://doi.org/10.3102/1687078

Media literacy during the coronavirus pandemic: Micro-ethnography on mass media-related anxiety in American college students

Introduction and Problem Statement

Media literacy is one of the most significant types of literacies in the modern society. Large populations of college students receive news from social media, where validity, reliability, and quality of the spread information cannot always be controlled. Some publications are of questionable intentionality, as found by multiple research studies (e.g., Kavanagh & Rich, 2018; McGrew et al., 2018; Mihailidis, 2018). Oftentimes, some facts are erroneously misrepresented, exaggerated, or underestimated, or, in some cases, facts may be intentionally falsified as found by many researchers (e.g., Buckingham, 2017; Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017).

Under these circumstances, the role of Media literacy appears to be crucial. Drawing on multiple research studies in the field of media literacy (e.g., Buckingham, 2017; Jacobsen et al., 2018; McGrew et al., 2018), Schmeichel et al. (2018) proclaim that, "Enacting media education when media credibility is in question presents a myriad of challenges" (p. 89). Nevertheless, American and International college students are exposed to the mass media publications and posts when being underprepared from the position of Media literacy.

During the time of the global chaos and panic, we identified the gap in the research on the role of media literacy at the times of the coronavirus pandemic. We conducted our IRB-approved micro-ethnographic case study with the purpose to understand whether mass media, such as TV, Internet-based publications, and social nets, such as Facebook may trigger anxiety in American college students. We also aimed to understand whether the mass media-related anxiety might negatively affect student academic achievement. With this knowledge, our secondary objective was to conceptualize resistance to mass media-related anxiety in students and to find the means

and strategies, which might help college students to better regulate their emotional conditions and intellectual prowess in the times of global distress, such as pandemics, natural disasters, etc.

Theoretical Considerations

We grounded our micro-ethnographic case study in Vygotsky's (1978; 1987) socio-cultural constructivism theory and social responsibility theory by Siebert et al. (1963). We explain our choice of the socio-cultural constructivism theory with the fact that the knowledge of individuals is being constructed in the process of socialization within the culture(s) they are immersed, according to Vygotsky. Thus, an individual's opinions, positions, perceptions of self, others, and the societal occurrences are deeply intertwined and rooted in the incoming from the societum and the surrounding culture flow of information. According to Vygotsky (2000), all the absorbed information is being processed, re-processed, and, finally, appropriated by the individuals, who, from the moment of internalization and appropriation, begin perceiving the received knowledge as their own.

We used Siebert et al.'s (1963) social responsibility theory, as a modification of the libertarian paradigm, as an additional umbrella for our micro-ethnographic case study because, according to the founders of this theory, "Man is no longer conceived of as a dependent being to be led and directed, but rather as a rational being able to discern between truth and falsehood, between a better and worse alternative, when faced with conflicting evidence and alternative choices" (Siebert et al., 1963, p. 3).

Methodology

Data Collection

Mass Media Tracking and Social Nets Activity Observations

For this study, we tracked publications in New York Times (NYT) daily starting off March 2020 and Cable News Network (CNN) by the end of every month. We also randomly tracked the published data in Aljazeera and Reuters. Though conducting our media tracking activities on daily basis, we updated our numeric data every three days, in the afternoon, using the NYT publications online. We also recorded the data about the coronavirus infection cases numbers and death toll published on the CNN website at the end of every month. We made screenshots of the maps, charts, graphs, and the numeric information from the reports on the coronavirus infection spread over the world every three days.

With the purpose to deeper understand the context, in which our research participants resided virtually, we were tracking the events, posts, and publications in the social nets. We focused on Facebook.com, as both the researchers and the participants had Facebook accounts at the time of this project.

On daily basis, we were scrolling down the "home" pages of our accounts, observing the public posts and writing analytic memos. Our objective was to track how the overall atmosphere, character, and mood of posts changed over the time during the coronavirus pandemic quarantine. In our analytic memos, we reflected on the number of alarming versus humorous posts and on the change in their ration over the time.

Participants

Our research participants were two International female students at an American urban college in the Northeastern United States. Both participants, Riana and Anna (pseudonyms are

used through the paper) were young ladies at the top of their teen years. This was the first year at an American college for both of our research participants. Though they started their education in an on-campus mode, by the end of March 2020, their classes had to transition to the fully online education due to the global coronavirus pandemic.

Interviews

We conducted our semi-structured interview with both of our participants via Zoom.com as at the time of our research project no one was allowed on any educational premises in the region. Our interview took approximately two hours.

Data Analysis

All the data was de-identified and set in a table, where each of the participant's speeches were color-coded in accordance with Saldana's (2013) principles. We utilized Saldana's (2013) thematic and value coding. In our data table, we opened a side column, where we outlined corresponding or significantly diverging themes and values obtained from our participants' interview utterances. Consequently, we combined in a separate chart all the themes and values on which our participants agreed. In order to deeper understand our participants' ideas about mass media and social media, we analyzed general audiences activities in Facebook. When our project was in progress, we also kept track of the publication in mass media. The data from the participant interviews were compared with the findings obtained through the social nets activity observation and our findings gained through tracking COVID-19 related mass media publications. We synthesized all the major recurring values and themes extracted from our data and developed this current report.

Findings

Findings Through Social Nets Activity Observations

We found some controversy and inconsistency in the nature, character, and purpose of the Facebook posts. Our findings confirm the ones by Schmeichel et al. (2018), who regarded studying media as the one that is characteristic of, "the loaded nature of addressing "controversial" current events using news sources which are themselves "controversial" (p. 93).

At the very start of the quarantine, users of social nets posted plethora of humorous photos, verbal jokes, and cartoons on diverse topics related to the pandemic. For example, there appeared a lot of posts about coronavirus affected behaviors in general audiences posted or re-posted by grad students and alumni on facebook.com (e.g., images of people who used different unsuited objects as masks, such as plastic containers or jars; pets wearing medical masks; people engaged in different pastime activities for the reason of boredom, due to the quarantine, for example, sleeping, playing Legos, etc.).

Nevertheless, over the time of the first two weeks of the quarantine, the nature and character of social nets' postings changed. There appeared multiple posts, whose authors issued warnings to general civilian audiences. For example, some of them urged community members to stay at their homes and not go outside without an urgent need, others prompted readers to wash their hands more diligently, or change clothes upon entering their homes, etc. With noticeably increased frequency, there appeared lists symptoms of coronavirus infection. Moreover, many people expressed their condolences and sympathies with the families who lost their relatives and loved ones to the pandemic.

Findings Through Mass Media Tracking

We started collecting numeric data through mass media at the start of the coronavirus quarantine. After the start of our project, the situation with the spread of the coronavirus infection reported by mass media significantly worsened.

By the end of March, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) predicted the coronavirus infection death toll in six digit figures.

Figure 1. Growth in numbers of cases over a period of ten days, from 03.21.2020 to 03.30.2020

Figure 2 Growth in numbers of deaths over a period of ten days, from 03.21.2020 to 03.30.2020

As it is seen in the Figures 1 and 2 above, by the end of March, the rate of the growth of the novel coronavirus infection cases and deaths significantly slowed down in China, according to the data supplied by the Chinese government. According to Siebert et al. (1963), both the leaders and the press in the countries with prevailing or partial authoritarianism might have filtered their outcoming data, up to the point when they provided to the global community misleading, partially distorted, or, at some instances, completely falsified information.

Findings Through Interviews

Both of our research participants were noticeably unable to adhere to the questions we asked. Both Riana and Anna merely answered the questions we asked and promptly deviated to the topics of their high concern. These topics were based on the information on the coronavirus pandemics our participants obtained from the social media. For example, our subjects shared that the panic about shortages of some particular goods came exactly from social nets. Riana and Anna furthered that being under strong influence from the posts in the social media, themselves as well as many college students rushed to the stores with the purpose to purchase the products

under discussion. Our participants shared they were shocked having found sold-out stores.

Riana and Anna regretfully confessed that their academic achievement and grades plummeted during the Summer and Spring 2020 semesters due to such factors as isolation, which drove them to spend longer hours in social nets. Nevertheless, instead of relief, these activity or, actually, inactivity added to the growing feeling of anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and depression. Our participants reported being saddened by the fact that they could not reunited with their families due to the travel restrictions, which was misinterpreted and misrepresented in some social media posts as a travel ban.

Riana expressed her concern with the further growth of coronavirus cases after the anti-racism *George Floyd* protests, which rolled all across the country. Both participants agreed that, as per their strong belief, most of the American young people, including college students, obtain information and news from social media nets rather than from newspapers, radio, or television. Both subjects indicated that they relied on and trusted the information found in the social media. The discourse of these students indicated they both were *brainwashed* and significantly negatively affected by the publications they read in social nets.

Discussion

Our research findings support the previously conducted studies in the fields of Education and Media Literacy (e.g., Buckingham, 2017; Indina, 2014; McGrew et al, 2018). This study found that inclusion of multimodal features in addition to textual messages in social media powerfully affects the readers (Anonymous, 2017; Anonymous et al., 2019). We also found that the nature of this affect during the COVID-19 pandemics lead to anxiety in college students. These populations found themselves being significantly negatively affected by their surroundings (Siebert, 1963; Vygotsky, 1978), including social nets. Regardless of the limitations of our study,

such as small sample size, our research found that young people either do not know or do not use verification strategies while navigating social media. Major implication of our study is that college students need to learn to discern between verifiable facts and distorted information posted in social nets.

Another implication is that college students submit to and modify their behaviors in accordance to the mass trends in social media. We believe more character education is needed to help college students avoid media-related anxiety, withstand its negative influence, and enhance their academic achievement. We suggest developing courses concerned with trustworthiness and reliability of publications in social media.

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Figures

Figure 1. Growth in numbers of cases over a period of ten days, from 03.21.2020 to 03.30.2020
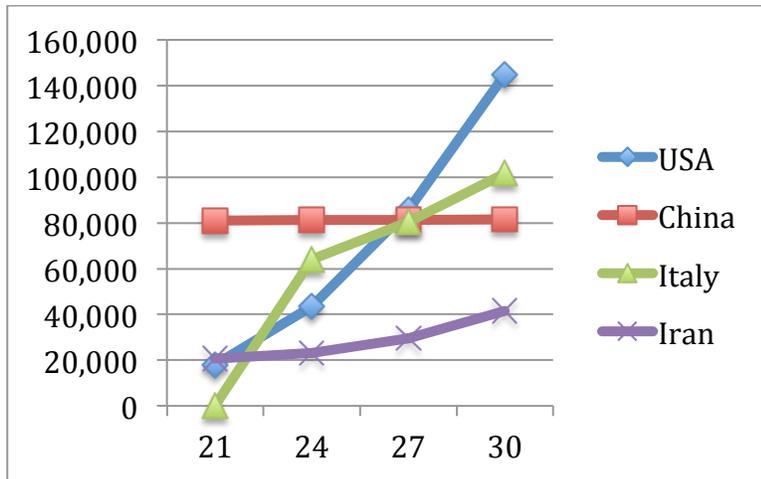

Figure 2 Growth in numbers of deaths over a period of ten days, from 03.21.2020 to 03.30.2020