

## **Cross-cultural Aspects of Fake News Literacy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews research “fake news” using a cultural lens to identify possible cross-cultural factors impacting how audiences react to misleading news. A cross-cultural communications cycle provides a framework for understanding the processes behind fake news and the consequences of the resultant fake news. Linguistic and visual cross-cultural issues are discussed, and strategies for discerning fake news and its cross-cultural implications are provided, culminating in an argument that fake news can serve as a motivating means to gain news literacy and cross-cultural competence.

*Keywords:* cross-culture, culture, disinformation, fake news, media literacy, news literacy

With the spread of the Internet and connected devices, news can spread globally and almost instantaneously. Unfortunately, the quality and veracity of the news spread by these means is very uneven, with available content including reliable facts, skewed but not inaccurate interpretations, innocuous fiction, and harmful deceit, often intermingled to make the value of each component challenging to determine. More than just frustrating to the knowledge-seeker, misleading and false information has real consequences that can lead to poor decision-making and even death. More than ever, news literacy is needed so that consumers can protect themselves by discerning fake news.

This situation is exacerbated when news travels between cultures, the most apparent recent instance being news about COVID-19. At the least, when audiences encounter news from a different culture – be it social, political, or ideological – they may misinterpret the news because they do not understand the assumptions or communication styles of people unlike themselves. Both language and images have culturally defined meanings, and the news topics link to varying cultural values. Especially if the news is created or broadcast from an oppositional group (e.g., a neo-Nazi group condemning Jews), there may be an intense emotional reaction and possible polarizing action. These cultural differences (e.g., attitudes toward gender roles, educational approaches, power distance) show that cultural competence is also needed to deal with fake and prejudicial news.

### **Literature Review Methodology**

This paper reviews literature about fake news using a cultural lens in order to identify possible cross-cultural factors in terms of audience reaction. EBSCO databases (Academic Search Complete, Communication Source, ERIC, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts APAPsycinfo and SocINDEX) and Google Scholar were consulted using the key terms fake news, disinformation, digital literacy, information literacy, media literacy, cultural

competence\*, global competence\*, and cross-cultural\*. Only English language sources were consulted. Because of their long-standing commitment to literacies related to fake news, the American Library Association and UNESCO websites were also searched with the same key terms. Cited references from the above sources led to further relevant resources.

### Definitions

A few terms need to be defined to lay the foundation for this issue. Basically, fake news is deliberate, published disinformation that purports to be true (Media Matters, 2016). *News literacy* is the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, and communicate news messages in various formats (Maksl et al., 2015). News literacy is a subset of *media literacy*, which entails the same competencies but is applied to many different kinds of media messages (Aspen Institute, 1992). *Digital literacy* is the cognitive and technical ability to responsibly access, evaluate, interpret, use, communicate, and generate information using digital technologies (American Library Association, 2011). The umbrella term *information literacy* is the ability to locate, access, evaluate, interpret, use, manage, communicate, and generate information responsibly (American Library Association, 1998).

*Culture* and *cultural competence* have their own set of definitions. UNESCO (2001) defined *culture* as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs” (p. 3). Cultures encompass both internal assumptions and attitudes as well as external behaviors based on norms and values. A person may belong to several cultures: family, ethnicity, profession, social club, or political party. People respond to culture at different levels, intellectually and emotionally. Some of a person’s lived cultures may overlap or even contradict, in which case, the person or group needs to live with the disequilibrium or resolve the conflict, which can occur on multiple levels. *Cultural competence* may thus be defined as a congruent set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions about one’s own culture and others that enable people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (i.e., those situations where people from different cultures interact) (Isaacs & Benjamin, 1991). Cross et al. (1989) listed the following criteria for cultural competence: 1) cultural self-assessment, 2) cultural knowledge, 3) valuing diversity, 4) management of the dynamics of difference, and 5) adaptation to cultural contexts.

The act of communicating across different cultures has two facets: If people from different cultures interact and share information, it is called intercultural communication. On the other hand, cross-cultural communication consists of comparing interactions among people from the same culture to those from another culture (Chen, 2007). In the latter situation, fake news creators might affirm their own culture in their message (e.g., “White supremacists fired Black employees”). However, people from another culture might find that message upsetting. If after the people of those two cultures have read that fake news, they then discuss that news, then it would be intercultural communication – and it might be confrontational if they are not culturally competent.

These cultural differences (e.g., attitudes toward gender roles, educational approaches, power distance) show that cultural competence is also needed to deal with fake and prejudicial news. How do fake news creators manipulate culturally sensitive language to impact their audience? To what extent does that language get misunderstood and differently interpreted by people of different cultures? How does that knowledge of several cultures help to decode fake news? In that respect, the more one knows how fake news is created – and for what reason – the more that one can see the need to be culturally aware and competent.

In light of these issues, research questions emerge:

- a) What possible cross-cultural factors impact how audiences react to misleading information?
- b) What strategies can audiences use to deal with those factors?

### **Cross-cultural Communication Cycle**

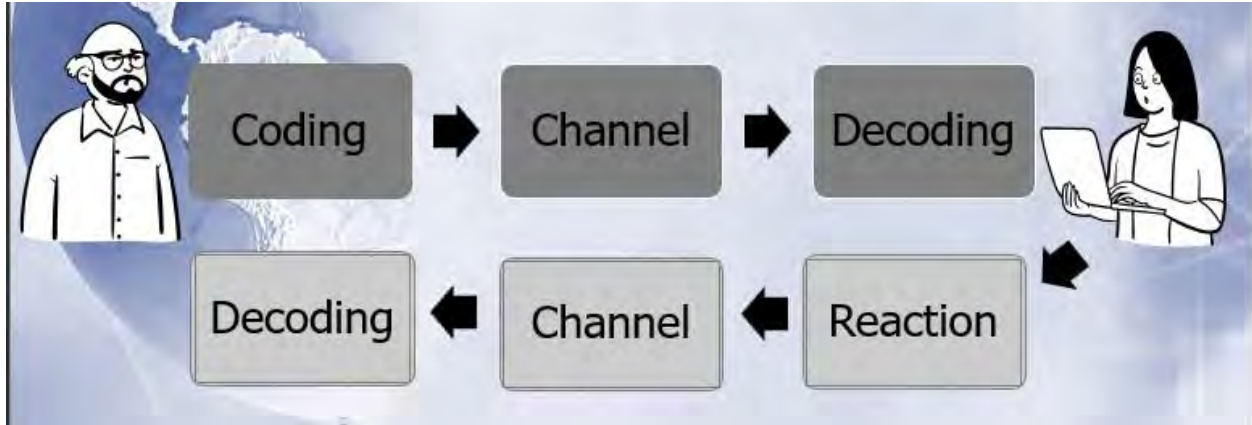
Schramm's 1948 communication cycle model offers a framework to understand the processes behind fake news communication and the consequences of the resultant communication. Traditionally, mass media, which includes news content, has consisted of one-way broadcasting; the audience does not co-create the news and might not ever directly communicate back to the news creator. That one-way communication still exists and tends to feature in fake news creation.

Schramm's communication model (see Figure 1) starts with the originator (one or more persons) who expresses an idea by coding it into some shareable medium (e.g., words, image) and then disseminates that coded message through some type of communication channel (e.g., radio, periodicals, Internet, television). People encounter the communication channel and receive its embedded message, then decode it; one could say that they consume it. The receiver/consumer might react (which is why the bottom line of actions are in a lighter shade) and send a message. That message could go in several directions, not necessarily to the creator (there is not a definitive arrow back to the originator – although if it does reach the originator, that action would then close the communication loop). When the receiver belongs to a different culture from the originator and perceives the message differently from the originator, then that situation constitutes cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, if the recipient sends a message back to the originator, the originator will likely decode and interpret it differently from the response's intent.

This cross-culture application of the communication cycle can thus provide a framework and critical lens to understand the processes behind fake news and identify possible cultural factors that impact the consequences of fake news.

### **Figure 1**

*Schramm's Communication Cycle*



Media literacy may be applied in this cycle. Specifically, the Center for Media Literacy (Jolls, 2022) developed media literacy questions for recipients to ask when examining fake news in particular, as well as news and, even more broadly, mass media in general:

- Authorship: who created the message (for example, the fake news)
- Purpose or motive: why the message was created
- Audience: the intended targeted audience
- Content of the message: ideas, values, lifestyle, point of view represented or omitted
- Format and production techniques: techniques used to attract audience attention and engage particular viewers or groups.

Practically anyone can create fake news; however, most fake news creators hold some kind of power they want to keep or increase (Funk et al., 2016). To that end, in framing a particular idea or agenda, fake news creators often make negative assertions about another culture they do not like – or feel threatened by – to diminish the power of that culture, a tactic that may work if such cultures are often already vulnerable. Their message may be directed toward their own culture to gain more supporters or toward the opposing culture to disturb or provoke those they consider their opposition. For instance, a White supremacist may claim that Mexicans are taking away Whites’ jobs, inciting fellow supremacists to threaten Mexicans in general.

As the fake news creators code the fake news for a communication channel to broadcast, they tend to use evocative language and images, which may be false or misleading, such as “explosive evidence” or mangled dead bodies. Moreover, fake news is likely to omit counterclaims or evidence. At this point, cross-cultural communication comes into play. Stereotyping and “othering” encourage fake news, particularly in war times or during political campaigns (Huber et al., 2022; Wasserman, 2020). Each culture has a unique linguistic vocabulary, word patterns, and vocal tones that might appear aggressive, jarring, or easily misinterpreted by members of a different culture. For example, some cultures, such as Chinese, might find American English speech too blunt and aggressive. Some images might be considered insensitive or inappropriate in some cultures, such as minimal clothing on a woman, which may evoke negative feelings that impact the viewer’s attitude and action. Sensitive and

taboo subjects are socially defined, and fake news can leverage such controversies to incite anger or polarization between cultures. This is especially likely when fake news is disseminated without context or human interaction, in such contexts as online memes where fewer cues are provided to clarify sometimes very ambiguous meanings (Holtbrügge et al., 2011).

Next, the fake news is sent through a communications channel, of which a wide variety is available, and these can vary significantly in terms of oversight, dissemination range, and ethical practice. Each medium has unique properties that shape and manipulate the messages its viewers consume. For news, that medium is likely to be evocative newspapers, which require reading literacy; authentic-sounding radio, which requires close listening skills; mass media television, which requires information literacy; and interactive Internet, especially social media, which requires digital literacy and other literacies. Members of some cultures may prefer certain mediums or specific news outlets, such as religious-affiliated television or radio broadcasts in their home language, especially if members of their own culture manage those broadcasts. One clever tactic that fake news creators may employ is depicting themselves as members of the targeted culture or using the targeted culture's favored news outlet to gain more credibility.

To be impactful, fake news has to be decoded, i.e., received and understood by an audience. This step assumes a degree of openness or neutral ignorance on the part of the recipient. If the news confirms a culture and its values, it is more likely to be believed, even if the news is fake. However, automatic disapproval or skepticism may result if the news comes from an oppositional group or frame. In addition, cultures may distrust other cultures, often based on past negative experiences, as evidenced by colonialism; surprisingly, skepticism of government news results in more susceptibility to fake news (Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020; Wasserman, 2020). As an example of this phenomenon, during the COVID pandemic, even valid news, such as advice on wearing masks, coded and communicated by a reputable government health agency, was commonly decoded as an attack on personal liberty by less educated libertarians.

A compounding problem is how the audience decodes the message, which requires several literacies many audience members may not possess. Audience members may have limited education (which may stem from cultural expectations of females in some conservative religions), digital literacy issues (which may reflect cultural values), and linguistic differences (Udeogalanya, 2022). When people do not understand another culture, they are more likely to misinterpret that other culture's message and make bad decisions. For example, a Christian might misinterpret the Koran term "jihad" solely as a call to a violent holy war and commit a hate crime against a peaceful Muslim. That action then completes the communication cycle, increasing misunderstanding and retaliatory action. When fake news creators manipulate that misinterpretation to instigate action, the intensity and negative consequences may increase.

### **Cross-Cultural Factors**

Culture poses a unique factor in discerning fake news, and cross-cultural aspects add a dimension to the issue that is likely to result in more misunderstanding and culture clashes. In the final analysis, discerning and decoding fake news should be examined in light of one's self-awareness, knowledge, and context, including culture. What are one's own cultural experiences, situations, and biases that may trigger personal reactions to different news, including fake news? Cultural perspectives influence the development of personal beliefs (e.g., religious dogmas), and personal experiences influence cognitive biases (e.g., getting bad service from a salesperson of a different ethnicity). Both of these types of biases impact the creation, dissemination, and discernment of fake news (Ciampaglia, 2018).

Literacy-specific cross-cultural factors impact the ability to discern fake news. When encountering a news item, one usually first tries to understand it, but even that task may be challenging. The most obvious literacy and linguistic focuses are on written and verbal use of language. Different cultures value different concepts so that relevant words may be more or less nuanced. Even seemingly objective words such as "swipe," "snatch," and "dog" have totally different meanings in different contexts; for these terms, swipe may mean to move or to steal, snatch may mean to grab, or it can refer to a sexist vulgarism, and dog may refer to a pet or something worthless. Idioms, in particular, may have different connotations in different cultures. Sports-related idioms highlight that issue; which cultures understand the meaning of "one for the Gipper" or "go the whole nine yards"? Some cultures emphasize the context of statements so that when a statement is extracted without context, it may be misconstrued or lose its meaning. For instance, "I'm dying to see you" could have a romantic intent, but it could also be misinterpreted without context to indicate that someone is literally on their deathbed. Similarly, cultures vary in how they structure arguments; some use a linear approach, and others use a spiral approach that moves from generalities to specifics. When reading a case built by a writer from a different culture who uses a different structure that they are not used to, the audience might not follow the argument's logic.

Visual aspects also color the interpretation of fake news. Regarding news, cultures may have preferences as to visual approaches, such as considering gender when photographing people (e.g., taking photos of women only in groups rather than individually) or avoiding eye contact. Some news topics may be taboo in terms of visualizing them, such as religious ceremonies. Color connotations can speak volumes; depending on the culture, white can evoke weddings or death, red can evoke festivity or violence, and yellow can evoke royalty or cowardice (Tektronix, 1998).

### **Strategies**

No easy answers exist in uncovering and accurately interpreting cross-cultural connotations. Fortunately, several heuristics and tools are available to help individuals address the objectivity and validity of news – and their reactions to news – considering cultural differences. Identifying the source of the news is a good first step. Does that information truly originate from the source, or is another entity disguising itself as the authentic group? Tracing a

story's origin can be challenging; Wayne State University has a useful LibGuide to facilitate that process (<https://guides.lib.wayne.edu/sift/trace>). Learners also need to check their biases and cultural “triggers,” so they do not have a knee-jerk reaction to evocative words and images. In the final analysis, understanding more about other cultures, particularly their communication styles and values, helps learners maintain an open mind when trying to interpret the validity of news from other cultures.

These cross-cultural factors and heuristics can be codified into news and media literacy curricula. As educators seek support for a culturally sensitive curriculum, they need to know about their learners' cultures to discern different shared values and expectations. In his adult training handbook, Craig (1996) asserted that ignorance or denial of cultural norms will spell disaster for cross-cultural initiatives. Both the dominant and minority cultures should learn about each other's cultural knowledge and values so they can promote mutual respect and understanding. To lay a credible and trusting foundation, educators first need to learn about the population they serve: their backgrounds, their interests, their needs, and their resources. Such tasks can be difficult in online environments without explicitly asking for such information in non-threatening ways. To optimize such group knowledge, individuals with multicultural experience can serve as cultural “brokers” for monocultural members. Those whose cultural background overlaps with other group members can integrate knowledge from different cultures, and those whose culture does not overlap can elicit knowledge from those other cultures. Both cultural functions enhance the group's performance (Jang, 2017).

Melo-Pfeifer and Gertz (2022) offer several beneficial practices in teaching critical cross-cultural news literacy.

- Examine samples of fake news about critical incidents that showcase situational clashes from a cross-cultural perspective, interpreting the situation from each represented culture.
- Analyze news about the same topic from different cultures to determine patterns of fake news.
- Analyze fake news in terms of its believability, depending on the culture.
- Study a culture's underlying linguistic and visual approaches, then use that knowledge to analyze fake news by that culture and by the culture targeting the culture.
- Compare a culture's representation, both in terms of frequency and quality, in a news outlet's general news in contrast to fake news.
- Have each learner study the pattern of fake news over time for one culture, and then have students compare their culture's approach and use of fake news to identify cross-cultural patterns.

### **Conclusion**

As fake news increasingly crosses cultures, it behooves people to discern possible culturally defined content and possible cross-cultural misinterpretations. People need to use

media literacy skills to discern misleading efforts, especially when fake news may try to provoke conflict between cultures. Discerning cross-cultural factors in fake news helps people understand the values and belief systems that drive the expectations and behaviors of people of different cultures. This knowledge aids in communicating effectively and working together for mutual goals.

### Future Research

This area of research is prime for investigation. Many configurations of fake news that crosses cultures could be researched, noting which cultures were the creators and which were the targeted “other” culture. Even the types of cultures (e.g., political, ethnic, gendered, social, religious) could be compared in terms of the kind of fake news created and how it was discerned and addressed. Regarding cross-cultural factors, the fake news topic and communication channel could also be researched. Researchers could also conduct a content analysis of the text and images of fake news to reveal possible cross-cultural factors. Interviews could reveal significant patterns, particularly ones that involve verbalizing the decoding processes and reactions of cross-cultural audiences to fake news. These investigations could provide the basis for designing and implementing cross-cultural news literacy training, which could then be assessed in terms of effectiveness.

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## Appendix

The following media literacy education organizations provide news and media literacy guidance from different parts of the world.

- UNESCO (<https://www.unesco.org/>)
- EAVI: Media Literacy and Citizenship (<https://eavi.eu>)
- Evens Foundation (<https://issuu.com/evensfoundation>)
- IREX Europe (<https://irex-europe.fr/>)
- Le centre pour l'éducation aux médias et à l'information (<https://www.clemi.fr/>)
- Ofcom (<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/>)
- Netwerk Mediavijsheid (<https://netwerkmediawijsheid.nl/>)
- Media Smarts (<https://mediasmarts.ca/>)
- AMLA: Alliance for a Media Literate America (<http://www.AMLAinfo.org>)
- Center for Media Literacy (<https://www.medialit.org/>)
- Media Education Lab (<https://mediaeducationlab.com/>)
- Media Literacy Now (<https://medialiteracynow.org/>)
- National Association for Media Literacy Education (<https://namle.net/>)

## About the Author

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