Rethinking education in the light of post-truth "new" racism and xenophobia: the need for critical intercultural media and news literacy

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Introduction

Post-truth can be described as a cultural phenomenon in which emotional or personal beliefs have more influence on public opinion and policy decisions than facts, evidence, or rational discourse (McIntyre, 2018). Objective facts and evidence may be downplayed, dismissed, or manipulated to support a particular narrative or agenda. In a post-truth environment, emotional or anecdotal appeals often take precedence over verifiable data or evidence when shaping public perception and influencing decision-making (Lilleker, 2018). In this sense, media reportage, social media (including fake news and hoaxes), popular culture, and interpersonal communication can build up perceptions of reality that become more "real" than reality itself. This allows people, groups, and political parties in power to use strategies, including "falsification, manipulation, or deception" to create "false consciousness" as means to colonize life, as it "promotes social pathologies but also limits the democratic, secular, and plural spirits of multicultural nations" (Ghosh, 2022, p. 7).

Critical scholars, therefore, caution that post-truth fuels intolerance, leading to "new" forms of racism, and xenophobia by distorting perceptions of "otherness" and creating fear (i.e., Giroux, 2020; Ghosh, 2022). As in this era, racism is not so much overt or blatant, "new" racism appears as the enduring or covert presence of inequality, injustice, and racial distinctions. It encompasses the codes, logics, and ideologies that enable, justify, and normalize power imbalances even when formal and explicit racism is no longer the case (Noon, 2018). Noon (2018) explains that "traditional, blatant racism has been suppressed and that expressions of racism take more subtle, covert and less visible forms […] a result of changing social norms that render it no longer acceptable openly to express racist views" (p. 200). In the context of post-truth, populism, misinformation and biased narratives that "scapegoat" vulnerable groups, reinforce stereotypes and amplify preexisting biases (Lilleker, 2018; Melo-Pfeifer and Dedecek Gertz, 2022). Moreover, post-truth environments can intensify social and political polarization, where individuals become entrenched in their own emotions and beliefs and are less open to cultural diversity (Zembylas, 2022). This polarization threatens social cohesion and social justice as it can lead to a more divisive society that is less tolerant of cultural diversity and lacks trust in culturally-diverse communities. Moving a step further, post-truth bears policy implications, as it can negatively influence public opinion and policy decisions related to migration, cultural preservation, and inclusion. Biased or manipulated information can lead to restrictive policies that limit diversity, in general, and cultural diversity, in particular (Lilleker, 2018).

Arguably, education can and should play an important role in addressing the detrimental consequences of the post-truth "crisis" with regards to facing "new" racism and xenophobia. Giroux (2020) warns that as the traits of the post-truth era "resurrect the discourse of racial cleansing and white supremacy", there is an imperative need that scholarship works for "reframing the purpose of education from "job training" to critical thinking and action" (p. 17). In this context, this opinion article aims to examine in what ways education may counteract post-truth-era threats to cultural diversity, social cohesion, and social justice. We therefore argue that there is an imperative need for critical intercultural media and news literacy. At the same time, this article aims to urge education stakeholders to rethink and re-engineer education policies, curricula, and methodologies to indeed make an impact on cultivating "critical thinking and action" in the post-truth era.

How can education mitigate post-truth "new" racism and xenophobia? The need for critical intercultural news literacy

In the light of the "new" racism and xenophobia caused by post-truth threats, intercultural education gains even more resonance, and becomes an imperative need (i.e., Ranieri et al., 2019; Zembylas, 2022). As divisive narratives and stereotypes can be pervasive due to fake-news and populist nationalism, intercultural education should aim for critical intercultural literacy to help individuals gain a deeper and more critical understanding of diverse cultures, their values, and worldviews (Melo-Pfeifer and Dedecek Gertz, 2022). Critical intercultural literacy refers to "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of a systematic process of reasoning, values present in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 2021, p. 140). It aims to promote awareness of cultural multiplicity and transnationalism in the global society; foster human rights and human solidarity; fight against social inequalities; demolish barriers to intercultural contact, such as xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and prejudice; and build intercultural competence (Dudeney et al., 2014).

In this sense, critical intercultural literacy may thus support social cohesion and solidarity that is severely eroded during post-truth times. It helps combating nationalistic thinking promoted by digital or news propaganda as it counters the spread of false information and promotes empathy (Dudeney et al., 2014). Notably, Shliakhovchuk (2021) recognizes intercultural literacy "as a crucial element of digital literacy", while Melo-Pfeifer and Dedecek Gertz (2022) urge education to cultivate "critical intercultural news literacy". Those who are interculturally literate are critical thinkers who recognize attempts at manipulation and propaganda based on cultural disinformation. What we argue in this article is that, in the era of new media (e.g., digital platforms and social media) propaganda, an interculturally literate citizen is an "engaged, empowered and critical news consumer" (Ashley et al., 2017, p. 81), At the same time, they may take proactive roles as citizens to reshape social reality and implement democratic principles accordingly. What we therefore

suggest is that in the post-truth era, education should support critical intercultural media and news literary to contribute to the fight against "new" racism and xenophobia (i.e., Ranieri et al., 2019).

Moving a step forward, many scholars favor the argument that appealing to emotions has become a prevailing approach in the post-truth era. Tobias (2021) cautions that emotional reactions exert influence (often outside of conscious awareness) on various cognitive processes including information processing and attitude formation. Drawing upon the above, critical intercultural media and news literacy should focus on delineating the ways to exploit emotions as guiding tools rather than sources of confusion. The answer for Boler (1999) lies in the pedagogy of discomfort; a pedagogy of discomfort is an educational approach that seeks to challenge individuals' existing beliefs, assumptions, and biases, fostering a deeper understanding of social issues, including racism. According to Boler (1999, p. 176), "the first sign of a successful pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn't want to know, and how one has developed emotional investments to protect oneself from this knowing".

A pedagogy of discomfort "requires that individuals step outside of their comfort zones and recognize what and how one has been taught to see (or not to see)" (Boler and Zembylas, 2003). Instead of ignoring or quelling these emotional meanings in information processing, students should be encouraged to explore what insights are to be had in the space between their emotions and their beliefs (Boler, 1999). Triggering individuals" emotions of discomfort creates the momentum for affirmative introspection. Individuals, thus, develop interest in gaining an insight into their personal or group values, worldviews, and beliefs that influence all spheres of life (i.e. personal, political, social etc.). Secondly, individuals reach self-governance by gaining mastery over their emotions as they critically reflect on social, ideological, and affective influences on their information processing (Alvermann, 2019).

A pedagogy of discomfort may in turn promote individuals' critical intercultural literacy by developing empathy as a step toward building trust, acceptance and respect to fight stereotypes mainstreamed in our societies. For Zembylas and Papamichael (2017), a pedagogy of discomfort creates the conditions for the cultivation of empathy as a stepping stone to social change. A pedagogy of discomfort challenges individuals to question information, think critically about sources, and analyse the broader context of social issues. These critical thinking skills are vital for dismantling misinformation and challenging stereotypes associated with racism. Furthermore, it allows for open and honest discussions about uncomfortable topics that provide a platform for diverse voices and perspectives (Ohito, 2016). This inclusive dialogue helps participants gain a more comprehensive understanding of racism and its manifestations, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for dismantling discriminatory structures. Last but not least, a pedagogy of discomfort may facilitate "social architecturing" by developing synergistic environments in which students are empowered to exert agency for taking informed and ethical actions that support social justice within socio-political contexts (Alvermann, 2019).

Conclusion

In the post-truth era, "new" racism and xenophobia have been on the rise due to populist propaganda, including the spread of biased misinformation and fake news (Giroux, 2020). What we have argued in this article, is that intercultural education needs to undergo a transformative process, gaining a critically-conscious understanding of critical media and news literacy as a lever for change for the polity and society (Ranieri et al., 2019). Arguably, intercultural education to be critical should inter alia cultivate metacognition on media use, propaganda, and populism (Shliakhovchuk, 2021). It should thus encompass critical intercultural media and news literacy to help individuals transcend from heuristics to critical consciousness (Alvermann, 2019), while developing metacognitive skills about "new" racism and xenophobia. Such an approach may also empower individuals to develop digital activism in combating latent forms of racism and xenophobia, while cultivating social justice.

In this endeavor, we argue that education stakeholders should rethink and re-engineer policies, curricula, and methodologies of education, in general, and intercultural education, in particular, to foster a pedagogy of discomfort. By introducing discomfort through discussions, readings, and activities that challenge established viewpoints, individuals are prompted to critically reflect on their own beliefs and prejudices (Ohito, 2016). This self-awareness is crucial for recognizing and addressing implicit biases related to racism circulated in news and media. Experiencing discomfort in a controlled and respectful learning environment can help individuals empathize with the experiences of marginalized groups. A pedagogy of discomfort helps disrupt the status quo and challenge the comfort of existing norms. This disruption is essential for motivating individuals to question and change ingrained patterns of behavior and thought that may contribute to perpetuating racism and xenophobia (Boler and Zembylas, 2003). Understanding the impact of racism on others can lead to increased sensitivity and a commitment to dismantling systemic inequalities.

In conclusion, discomfort can be a catalyst for action. When individuals feel the discomfort of realizing their own biases or the impact of "new" racism, they may be more motivated to actively contribute to anti-racist initiatives, advocate for change, and engage in activism for social justice (Zembylas and Papamichael, 2017). Intercultural media and news education that causes discomfort can be transformative. It goes beyond superficial awareness and encourages individuals to undergo a process of personal and intellectual growth. This transformative learning is key to fostering long-term commitment to anti-racist practices.

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