1.2 Information and Disinformation Through Advertising Literacy in Communication Studies: Action Research and Real Social Projects

Abstract: In today’s “liquid modern world” where everything is transitory and perishable and consumerism has become a social product in itself accelerating the cyclic reposition of worn goods and services, nourished by a fear of dropping out of “the social circulation” of esteem and human networks a growing number of critical societal actors have started to demand a more responsible approach for commercial communication, requiring more complete, accurate and truthful information about brands and corporations. Consumers, consumer organizations, communication scholars and media, among others, are willing to become part of the co-creation of brand information and stories, moving the focus from disinformation to information, responding to the demands for a more responsible commercial world, aligned with the emerging concept of responsible research and innovation (RRI). New interactive ways of advertising and the blurring of boundaries between advertising and entertainment also contribute to creating a challenging scenario for future advertising professionals who need to re-define their way of informing and communicating not only with consumers but all other societal stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to explain how including advertising literacy and education in the curricula of university level communication studies and applying innovating teaching methodology can efficiently respond to at least part of these new societal demands, emphasizing the “right impacts and values” of advertising by future communicators.

1 Advertising Literacy and Youth

Since the start of the new millennium, dramatic changes in the commercial media environment have occurred because the boundaries between advertising, entertainment and information have become increasingly blurred (Balasubramanian et al. 2006).
A growing body of research has been devoted to areas of content that are not traditionally viewed as advertising such as sponsorships, brand content, street marketing, product placement and other new techniques. These advertising formats often contain hidden attempts to persuade and are not immediately recognized as advertising by the consumer (van Reijmersdal 2009).

Over the years online advertising has evolved and changed drastically from simple advertising formats to banner ads, pop-ups and interstitials, to sophisticated interactive 3D visualizations and “advergames” (Faber et al. 2004). Nowadays social networks are also used to improve advertising strategies. These relatively new forms of communication are challenging the ways that we understand and process advertising.

Digital advertising communication is developing new ways to engage with audiences and is transforming the media environment. Today attention is focused on integration not only in advertising, but in all kinds of commercial communication, and therefore transmedia strategy is involved in new ways of making ads and the relationship with brands.

Brands are transforming into brand utility and entertainment intended to help people in their life journey. Traditional and intrusive ads are becoming less common while consumers’ understanding of products, services and corporations is often perceived in terms of brand utility and entertainment, i.e. how brands can help people cope with and enjoy their everyday lives.

This integration of advertising and entertainment has opened up an innovative new way to understand advertising communication. It is generally assumed that young people are easily persuaded by these subtle formats, which often involve integrated advertising, because the young are thought to be less aware of their persuasive intent. Consumers are sceptical of advertising because of the bias of the source and the advertiser’s aim to persuade the consumer. This could be particularly relevant for the diverse formats of the Internet, since the source of content found on websites is more difficult to evaluate compared with traditional media sources. Thus for consumers it is also more difficult to identify the source of online content and evaluate its credibility. In a nutshell, developing Internet advertising literacy has become more challenging in today’s rapidly developing media and communication scenery, where digital advertising is changing in its format and content every day. The creation of new technologies such as APPs, virtual worlds or augmented reality creates difficulties for understanding and interpreting new forms of advertising.

Also, changes are happening because the boundaries between offline and online are disappearing. Brands today have the opportunity to research and know more than ever about their public due to big data processing. For that reason, they can create specific contents for more and more specific audiences,
based on precise behavioural retargeting. Audiences need to be trained for these new types of advertising communication in order to help them gain new kinds of advertising and media literacy.

Content which is strategically planned by companies and interacts with the public through their own communication channels improves the effect of advertising, because it creates an engagement with the brand. Rather than using traditional mass media, brands nowadays often use their own channels where they can better control the message and language, interact with consumers, and better target the public.

It is generally assumed that integrated formats are more effective in evoking some persuasive outcomes, such as product attitudes, than non-integrated formats (Balasubramanian et al. 2006). The most important theoretical explanation for this assumption is that people are expected to be more critical toward advertising than toward editorial content (van Reijmersdal et al. 2015). This is where the question of the ethical implications of information and disinformation arises, as persuasive and commercial communication uses the means and styles of journalistic and informative communication that can easily confuse, especially the young public. If content is seen as editorial the consumers’ critical observation becomes more relaxed.

Up to now there has been a lack of integration between persuasion knowledge and advertising literacy studies and research on advertising effects, but recent studies tend to consider both aspects. In a review of research on children’s advertising literacy, Rozendaal, Lapierre, et al. (2011) observed that existing conceptualizations of advertising literacy primarily entail conceptual knowledge of advertising (i.e. the ability to recognize and understand advertising messages). However, based on insights from persuasion processing theories they argued that because most contemporary advertising appeals to children on an affective level, children are expected to primarily process advertising under conditions of low elaboration. Consequently, young people are unlikely to use their conceptual knowledge of advertising to critically evaluate the advertisements they are confronted with.

Based on this line of reasoning, Rozendaal, Lapierre, et al. (2011) stressed the need to extend the prevailing one-dimensional conceptualization of advertising literacy (i.e. conceptual knowledge of advertising, which is referred to as conceptual advertising literacy) with two extra dimensions: attitudinal advertising literacy, which includes low-effort, attitudinal mechanisms that can function as a defence under conditions of low elaboration, and advertising literacy performance, which takes into account the actual use of conceptual advertising knowledge when confronted with advertising.
The first dimension, conceptual advertising literacy, is the ability to recognize and understand advertising messages. This ability concerns the selling proposal of the ads, understanding who pays the advertising, understanding the targeting and persuasive intent. Persuasion knowledge, which is also often referred to as “advertising literacy” in the literature on children and advertising (Livingstone, Helsper 2006), can be defined as concerning the consumers’ beliefs about the motives, strategies, and tactics of advertising. The second dimension, attitudinal advertising literacy, involves taking a critical attitude toward advertising based on scepticism and a dislike of advertising.

Finally, the third dimension, advertising literacy performance, is the ability to actually use the conceptual advertising knowledge when confronted with the advertising (Rozendaal et al. 2009). This takes into account the actual use of conceptual knowledge of advertising while being exposed to it, and the retrieving and applying of advertising knowledge.

Most traditional studies have concentrated on two components: recognition of advertising and understanding of its selling intent (Kunkel 2010). Even if we grant that the young have the necessary conceptual knowledge of advertising in place, it does not necessarily follow that they will actually enact it as a critical defence against its persuasive appeal (Moses, Baldwin 2005). In this case, they are more vulnerable when encountering messages in advertising that can be considered as disinformation.

When we are talking about advertising literacy, usually we focus on children and young people. In this paper we extend both the definition and explanation to university level students of advertising communication. The mere fact of knowledge of advertising communication and literacy does not imply that it can be adequately applied. For our students it is necessary to practice the knowledge they have acquired in order to become advertising literate. If they have the first dimension (conceptual literacy), but are not able to improve their attitudinal and performance skills, they will not develop advertising literacy and consequently become well informed.

Also, they must be trained to explore advertising and the other innovative forms of communication in a digital world, analysing the good practises of advertising and contributing through our profession to create a better world, helping societies to improve and grow. Advertising literacy and education is not just about acquiring theoretical notions and technical skills, but also about becoming critical and responsible. In practice, we cannot separate digital literacy and advertising literacy from media and information literacy, so in our classrooms we try to reproduce a working context where students can contribute to and a share their life experiences at the university, motivating them to use their own skills and competences that they have acquired outside of university. The
current education system often neglects the self-learned competences students have acquired outside of academia that are valuable for future advertising professionals, such as editing, designing and music among others, skills they share with each other, acting as teachers or mentors.

When it comes to the digital classroom we often leave students to lead a session and direct projects related to our teaching subjects (advertising, public relations, creativity, leadership, social communication), giving them responsibilities and facing them with real work contexts. With the assistance and mentoring of communications professionals students feel more assured, try to do their best, and learn from mistakes. Also, as they use their own digital communication skills in the classroom, they become more self-confident in their private life, and that is clearly reflected in their professional capacities and performance. As future leaders in advertising they must be able to develop valid information for a more responsible society and not resort to disinformation or misinformation in any form.

As Buckingham says (2003), media literacy refers to broad-based skills and competencies that people must have when they try to communicate, understand and create media texts and meanings in the modern media age. The term “digital natives” must be extended to embrace not only technological skills but also critical and user competences in a wider concept. These are the 21st century skills that citizens, and communicators in particular, must have to be able to use digital services and be responsible and critical consumers and creative content creators.

As Professor Kupiainen underlines, students learn in informal environments but these alone are not enough for a complete education, so if universities and schools can bring together both worlds (formal and informal) maybe they can learn in a more appropriate way. Using their digital skills inside the university can help students acquire a deeper knowledge of them, for example when they use it to collaborate in pairs, digital responsibility, etc. (Kupiainen 2013). He talks about cultural media education, where the focus is on everyday meaning making where people, especially children and young people, use media to communicate in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

The starting point for media literacy is not just about cognitive or individual skills. The basic question is: what kinds of literacies and skills are needed in the information society? How are media literacy, digital literacy and advertising literacy required in everyday social and cultural practices? Binkley et al. (2010), when introducing the 21st century competences required for the current information society mentions information and ICT literacies as tools to work with, and our team would add information literacy. However, in this chapter we often refer
to the term advertising literacy as a global concept, meaning the entire set of literacies relating to advertising and media.

Now we cannot fully understand the above mentioned forms of literacy other than in terms of information literacy, relating them to the concepts of information, disinformation and misinformation. Karlova and Fisher (2013) make a differentiation between misinformation, understood as inaccurate information, and disinformation, seen as deliberately deceptive information. The authors conclude that misinformation and disinformation are closely linked to information literacy, especially in terms of how they are diffused and shared and how people use both cues to credibility and cues to deception to make judgements.” (2013, p. 1). The authors argue that information and disinformation must be taken into consideration in the field of information behavior, as elements of information literacy, because inaccuracies and deceptions “permeate much of the world’s information” (Karlova, Fisher 2013, p. 2). Advertising and other forms of commercial communication deal with information and the mere fact that their focus is always persuasive, often openly so, does not excuse abusive, non-accurate and incomplete uses of information, and even less so disinformation and misinformation.

Commercial communication and specially advertising are often accused of disinformation and even deliberate cheating when delivering brand information. The exaggerations about brand attributes and the lack of complete and comprehensive information on product labels (misinformation) have caused large-scale social criticism of advertisers and agencies, for example the recent discussions in the field of alimentation about the excessive amount of sugar, nitrates and other potentially health damaging ingredients in processed food products or about the use of terms such as “natural” when referring to food products. Consumer organizations, media and an increasing number of consumers have started to demand more accurate and complete information not only on products and services, but also on the corporate brands behind the goods.

Now, the role of advertising students as “prosumers”, future professional producers of commercial communication and at the same time consumers, opens interesting and challenging perspectives for advertising education. Media and information literacy, advertising literacy and digital literacy teaching can be understood within the framework of social responsibility and sustainability demanded by critical societal actors, and future communicators can become front-runners in terms of the equalling of power between consumers and advertisers.

The educational strategy that can respond to new societal demands is aligned with the new focus in science, the concept of RRI, responsible research and innovation, which also applies to the field of academia. The methodology of real social projects as a means of advertising literacy education for future
communicators, proposes some answers to these new societal challenges and the demand for more responsible advertising campaigns in terms of fostering better and truthful communication and co-production with society, moving from disinformation to information in commercial communication.

2 Real Social Projects and Action Research as a Vehicle for Advertising Literacy and Values Education Among University Communication Students

2.1 Background for the Methodology of Real Social Projects and its Relation to Advertising and Information Literacy

Since 2003, a team of lecturers and researchers from the Faculty of Communication Science, Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) has been applying the methodology of real social projects in the teaching of advertising and public relations to undergraduate and master’s degree students, recognized by and receiving financial support from the Complutense Fund for Educational Innovation and Quality Improvement. A project that started as a pilot experience with a small group of students organizing a charity event for the Madrid food bank, has developed into a shared action research and communication management project among students, lecturers and non-profit organizations, including international and non-governmental organizations (NGOS), with around 400 to 500 students that yearly benefit from the methodology and with more than 100 third-sector entities as partners. As a result of more than ten years of the application, study, innovation and improvement of the methodology of real social projects, this teaching system has been validated as an efficient vehicle not only for teaching research and communication strategies, but also to help students gain the kind of literacies required for professional communicators: advertising, media, information, ICT and digital literacies.

The method of real social projects, developed within the framework of interactive learning systems, consists of the planning and implementing of real research and communication projects for a non-profit organization. Experience is acquired in a professional context and thus the project is largely based on the experiential learning theory and cyclic learning processes originally developed by Dewey (1997 [1938]) and further by Kolb (2014 [1984]). Students become the main actors of their learning process and learn to take responsibilities working with
the NGOS, whereas lecturers act as mentors and coaches to the group. The methodology is based on collaborative learning, a teaching approach that was consolidated in higher education in the late 1990s (Bruffee 1999; Cabrera et al. 2002) and is today used in study communities. Within the project a collaborative focus means including three actors that create a multidirectional working network: students, lecturers and non-profit organizations. Students assume the role of an advertising or PR agency, lecturers act as account supervisors and NGOs actually become real clients and demand services from the student teams.

Teaching and investigating advertising literacy (and related literacies) among young people is a challenging issue in itself, but exploring and working on the concept with advertising students opens new perspectives, as here the youth, that would be subject of study in a traditional research focus, will become investigators and designers of the campaigns in their professional future and thus, have a larger knowledge of commercial communication strategies, intentions and symbols than young people in general. Their double role as consumers and would-be professional communicators gives them a deeper understanding of the commercial world. But does it always necessarily make them more responsible than other young people? The answer is no, not if we only concentrate on educating students in conceptual advertising literacy and forget the attitudinal and performance levels.

Today’s “liquid modern world” as Bauman (2010) defines the postmodern era, is a society where everything is transitory and perishable, where consumerism has become a social product consisting of the cyclic reposition of worn articles, which gains meaning because citizens are afraid of losing market value if not consuming and fear being left out of “the social circulation” of esteem and networks of friends, aspects that define us as members of the group. In advertising, more than in many other fields of communication, the game is about generating feelings of belonging, creating shared brand universes and building consumer fidelity.

Advertising students follow trends and are aware of new tendencies in the commercial world, not just because they are interested in fashion and trendy topics, but also because their studies demand it. And no doubt they use “cool brands” as other students do in order to underline that they are different, to integrate into a desired youth environment and group. Belonging to and being inside the right kind of social circles can be as important to communication students as it is to mathematics students, but still, understanding the mechanisms of persuasion and the underlying social and psychological aspects is bound to give them more tools to be critical with respect to advertising and other commercial messages.
The age of innocence of interpreting openly persuasive forms of advertising as objective information is long gone, but in the field of publicity for instance, the distinction between information and disinformation is often tricky, because it relies on influence and persuasion, and also uses an informative appearance that can easily be mistaken for journalistic content. Publicity uses critical and civilizing messages, with underlying persuasive significations, but these are often camouflaged, simulated or dissimulated (Craig 2014, p. 20). To defend themselves, students must know what it is all about. To use this kind of communication in the future, communication students must learn the ethical implications of information. What Twitterers, Instagramers, YouTubers and other social media influencers say is happily shared by most of us, as long as it is new and surprising. But how often do we, young or old, consider whether we are spreading information, misinformation or even disinformation? Do we really consider the objectiveness and truth of the messages we forward and comment on?

The rapid changes in today’s communication scenery set new demands for literacy education and require new definitions for information, misinformation and disinformation in the commercial world. Generally seen as to the opposite of misinformation and disinformation, information is often associated with the notion of “truth”. For example, De George (2003) makes a distinction between data and information because data contains no claims to truth whereas information does.

Stahl (2006, p. 90) argues that for a critical researcher truth can never be an objective description of external reality and that all perception is always value-laden and based on prejudices. In the author’s interpretation of information, misinformation and disinformation, Stahl describes the concepts from the perspective of two of the most widely cited authors in CRIS (Critical Research in Information Systems), Habermas and Foucault. From a Habermasian focus, misinformation is not problematic, it is seen simply as information that is contentious and that will for this reason be analysed in a discourse, where the person claiming truth will need to explain his reasons. Disinformation is more problematic, as it is seen as information that deliberately alienates or disempowers people. For a Foucauldian, distinguishing misinformation and disinformation is artificial as it supposes there is a universal truth and that the speaker has self-reflectiveness in terms of her own intentions when speaking (Stahl 2006, p. 91). It is the alienating and disempowering risk of deceptive informing, mentioned by Habermas, that seems particularly relevant for the advertising education project described in the present chapter, especially when collaborating with third-sector organizations, where building trust is a core concept when dealing with the public and beneficiaries of social and cooperative projects. Students need to learn the limits of information, as well as the dangers of mis- and disinformation.
The protective and preventive role of advertising literacy education in terms of responsible advertiser and consumer behavior is implicitly present in many of the subjects taught at communication schools (such as professional deontology and ethics or consumerism), but the focus changes when it comes to non-profit advertising teaching. The real social projects team emphasizes the role of advertising literacy among communication students not so much as a means of protection against the persuasive tricks of advertisers but more as education in values and social responsibility towards all the important stakeholders of the marketplace: consumers, clients, media, consumer associations, environmental organizations, coworkers in the advertising agency, etc. This also implies facilitating a broad understanding of information literacy to the students, in terms of information, disinformation and misinformation. In our experience, collaborating with non-profit organizations facilitates an adequate environment for acquiring these multiple types of literacy related to advertising focused on values in today’s complex and highly competitive commercial ecosystem.

2.2 Action Research in Communication Education: Realistic Feedback for a Growth Mindset

Over the years of applying the methodology of real social projects, the team has tested and used diverse research techniques, but it is action research that best adjusts to the specific environment of the project that combines two levels of study: 1. applied research for non-profit organizations and 2. teaching methodology research and quality improvement, focusing on real social projects and advertising literacy. Action research, as pointed out by Stringer (2014), provides a means to find effective solutions to problems in localized settings and thus helps organizations increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work:

“Far from providing a set of fixed prescriptions to be applied in any context, action research provides a flexible and practical set of procedures that are systematic, cyclical, solution oriented and participatory, providing the means to devise sustainable improvements in practice that enhance the lives and well-being of all participants.” (2014, p. 5)

The research is required to produce improvements and action that can make practical changes to the lives of the persons involved, rather than merely generate neat reports which are filed away and then forgotten. Non-profit organizations, especially small ones, that often lack qualified communication departments due to scarce resources, benefit from the studies provided by the student team collaborating with them and this has repercussions for the professionalization of their workforce. Also, as scholars, students and NGO workers together study
examples of good and bad campaigns, this can be viewed as “in-company advertising literacy coaching” contributing to the learning of good practice, often necessary for small organizations that cannot hire communication professionals or agencies.

At the non-profit level, using action research techniques and collaborative working systems where students, lecturers and NGO communication officers, and sometimes even the beneficiaries of the social project, act hand in hand generates productive communication campaigns that can have a direct impact on many underprivileged people’s lives. Ideas and input from all the collectives participating in campaign creation are incorporated into the phases of strategic planning using a collaborative approach to inquiry (Stringer 2014) that can provide the team with the means to take the right kind of systematic action and resolve specific problems. For example, in drug prevention campaigns designed by students, part of the problem – young people consuming substances – will become part of the solution, as students that have tried drugs know the motivations for consuming them and can thus contribute better insights to prevention campaigns than might formal survey results.

At the communication school level this leads to better teaching practices, augmented advertising literacy and higher motivation levels among communication students. Also, students gain self-esteem when confronted with the real professional world, when they realize that they are actually able to handle tricky communication strategies, not just fictitious class assignment. The feedback is more realistic, criticism is more constructive and students receive praise in its just measure. Dweck’s work on mindsets and how they can contribute to people’s success (2006), as well as his paper on the perils and promises of praise (2007), alerts us to the risks of excessive appraisal. Dweck finds (as cited in Leather 2013) that praising intelligence or abilities gives a “fixed mindset” that, when presented with a challenge, causes withdrawal from the task, lowering motivation and sense of self; whereas helping people to develop their “growth mindset” generates motivation and an enhanced sense of self as well as resilience.

Our lecturing team has realized that constructive criticism and measured positive comments and coaching practices when working in real projects, seem to help students in their professional development and personal growth. Over 90% of the participating students over the past decade whose opinions are collected and analyzed every end of semester, have expressed their positive opinion of the teaching methodology and declared that they feel more confident and prepared to face the challenges of their future work posts.

As a whole the project is about developing advertising literacy and education praxis for social change, sharing the educational philosophy and action lines of Vallaeyys (2003), Soares (2011) and Custódio (2015), among others.
2.3 Working Procedures and Practical Experiences:

Usually, every beginning of term when the team starts to work in the project, the first step is to explore the market and issue in question as a prior step to designing communication strategies and campaigns for the non-profit organizations that students collaborate with. In parallel to students’ research actions, the lecturing team begins to analyze the educational and motivational value of the global project: they use participant and classroom observation to monitor and create an adequate work climate, list and measure learning expectations using surveys and class discussions, as well as explore the values involved in third-sector advertising and communication through case studies of campaigns. At the end of the semester student feedback is gathered by focus groups and surveys and changes are made to readjust the teaching methodology. Though questionnaires are used to quantify student opinions, observational and narrative action research methods such as those described by McKerman (2013) and seen above are used by the real social projects team, permitting a deeper look into any problems and progress and enabling adjustments to practice.

To visualize the working procedures, we will describe the yearly Africa Conference that journalism students organized during two academic courses as their public relations class assignment. One half of the students were assigned organizational issues of the conference, whereas the other half dealt with diverse issues of African reality and delivered their findings in conference papers and posters. The students working on these specialized reports used diverse research techniques, such as media content analysis, expert interviews, literature review and surveys to explore issues such as human trafficking, diamond wars, child soldiers, refugees, the African press, gender roles, hunting, nature preservation, music, etc. Some of the students applied the research outcomes to design campaigns for NGOs. In these kinds of working environments that deal with sensitive social and developmental issues, students gain information, reducing dis- and misinformation, and acquire a critical point of view on topics that are not mainstream in traditional media or formal university curricula.

As for the organizational aspect, taking as an example the conference management team, the students did market research by analyzing competing conferences by type, persons, entities and the press that work in issues related with the continent, then contacted and interviewed journalists, writers and experts on African society as well as African youth, to get involved and become speakers or sponsors at the conference. These continuing cycles of investigation permitted the team to get a glimpse of the complexity of African realities and also helped them to create visibility for the continent within the academic community. In classroom sessions during the planning period of the conference, aid
organizations and NGO campaigns were studied in order to foster advertising literacy within the charities and aid organizations with the aim of outlining the differences in values that they represent, and this way students learn that they cannot use the same strategies, coding system, images and messages as in traditional corporate and product advertising and communication.

For example, regarding a campaign proposal for Food Bank, students were asked why a commercial cannot show a beggar scavenging through a street dustbin even if it is legal and seems like a striking idea for an ad? On the one hand, it goes against ethics, as most homeless people do not want to be shown in that kind of situation. On the other hand, generating the association between trash bins and Food Bank might make people suspicious of the origin of the foodstuffs the NGO delivers. At the communication school, an important part of advertising literacy teaching when applied to the third sector, deals with moral restrictions and rules that go beyond the legal and written ethics statements, and action research helps students to discover the underlying reasons. As McNiff and Whitehead (2011) state: “action research is value laden and morally committed” (2011, p. 27), and when applied to charities it is even more so.

Another efficient way of learning advertising literacy within the class project was the designing of communication strategies for NGOS, a task that some teams completed and presented during the conference having previously attended briefings and brainstorming sessions with the communication department executives of the organization. This way of teaching works through in-company (or in-NGO) learning where the organization’s communication manager becomes a tutor by showing students previous and competing campaigns and analyzing benchmarking adds and communication actions, so that the trainees can design new strategies and action plans for the organization. Critical analysis of not only ads, but also media information of issues related to the NGO’s cause is also included, where students learn to distinguish between information, disinformation and misinformation. Learning and research become action, but with more knowledge and with respect for different realities and vulnerable beneficiaries.

### 2.4 “Learning by Doing” and “Co-creation” as Strategies for Action Research and Advertising Literacy Learning

The strategy of learning by doing (DuFour et al. 2006) and experiential learning (Kolb 2014 [1984]) have proved their efficiency in the application of the methodology of real social projects where students must assume responsibility for entire communication campaigns and research projects that will have public exposure through the mass media and measurable impacts on key audiences, in
addition to any positive repercussions on the realities and life conditions of many underprivileged people in the case that the campaign succeeds.

In many of the advertising campaigns designed by students targeting young consumers or the public, the gap between industry and the public becomes so narrow that we can talk about co-creation (Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004; Hatch, Schultz 2010). A tendency especially visible in social media is guerilla marketing and the organization of events, where the consumers or users take an active part in the communication. However, in social media where nearly everyone has the potential of becoming an author, the risk of false information arises. Among others, Popava (2015) and Keshavarz (2014) alert us to questions of reliability and credibility on the web; information versus dis- and misinformation. Hence our team has included information literacy as part of the advertising education project.

In communication education, both reception and creation competences should be developed to gain media and advertising literacy (Díaz-Aguado Jalón et al. 2015, p. 226), especially when teaching takes place at the school of communication. With a combined focus, young people can reach a deep understanding of how persuasive communication works and develop a capacity for critical reception as well as learn about ethical and efficient ways to design communication strategies as future advertising and PR professionals. The experience our team has acquired collaborating in drug prevention campaigns with Atenea Foundation and the Madrid Community Drug Prevention Plan, described in this chapter, illustrates the double role of media, information and advertising education where students are seen both as a target public and as creators of a campaign. Co-creation is often used by our team, especially when the campaign targets young people, as this way students study the young audience from the inside and gain quick insights through the use of participative action research methodology.

As a first phase for the drug prevention campaigns, students received an intensive course on drugs and the physical, psychological and social implications of consumption. The second phase was dedicated to peer research, where students interviewed and filmed anonymous student statements for and against drug use. Students were encouraged to share the information they had acquired during the course, but instead of using the “authority, parent, big brother telling” strategy, it was an example of peer education, using the informal discourse of young people. After the preparation process, students had acquired the necessary level of knowledge concerning drugs and prevention, but they still needed to learn more about prevention campaigns, motivations and the values they involve.

This is why an advertising literacy module was included as part of the project, where students took part in campaign case studies from the point of
view of both reception and creation. First, students learned about the mechanisms that get young people addicted and how communication can contribute to informing and dissuading drug use by analyzing ads and social media messages and discerning the creative strategies behind the campaigns. Messages, language and image codes, type of storytelling, social representations and the tone of narrative, among others, were analyzed by students and understood not only from a theoretical perspective, but also on a personal level as part of the target audience for the campaigns. Having received a course in drugs and prevention, students were able to detect cases of disinformation in the communication materials they analyzed and demonstrated that they had gained information literacy. It was only after this learning phase that students could begin to themselves create, and take part in a contest designing campaigns based on the knowledge acquired in the workshops.

2.5 The Teaching of 21st Century Skills and Advertising Literacy

The need for new knowledge and general competences required for the 21st century information or knowledge society have been identified and largely discussed by scholars (Plomp 2013; e.g. Binkley et al. 2010). The Assessment & Teaching of 21st Century Skills Project (see http://atc21s.org) defines the educational aims relating to the competences employers’ demand of entry-level workers in today’s information-age society and that should be included in today’s school curricula. These skills, many of which our college level students still lack, are grouped under the acronym KSAVE, meaning knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and ethics. The project identifies ten skills organized in four broad categories (Binkley et al. 2010). The ATC21S has been used as a starting point for improving our educational innovation and advertising literacy projects at the Faculty of Communication to assist in adjustment to future workplace requirements. The following adaptation of the model (Binkley et al. 2010) shows how these can be integrated into university level communication and advertising literacy education, using real social projects and action research as a basis for the methodology.

Ways of Thinking:
1. Creativity and innovation
2. Critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making
3. Learning to learn/metacognition (knowledge about cognitive processes)
Working on advertising campaigns fosters a student’s ability to create and innovate and has all the challenges of a real work context with the requirements and deadlines of any work assignment. Working with real professional projects, not just simulations, forces students to make decisions, solve problems and learn to be critical in terms of research plans, strategies and creative pieces. Learning by doing a real campaign gives them a better insight into the creative process than simulated class assignments.

Tools for Working:
4. Information literacy
5. Information and communication technology (ICT) literacy

Training future advertising and communication professionals requires including information and ITC in the methodology as well as media and advertising literacy education systems and toward this aim analyzing and working with a real campaign offers an adequate platform. The team emphasizes the importance of information literacy and a broad understanding of information and disinformation, including it in the project curricula. Social networks, shared online workplaces and the virtual campus are largely used in the projects, but this is a field where improvement by our team is required. Cross disciplinary collaboration with the Faculty of Information Science is planned so as to foster more advanced practices.

Ways of Working:
6. Communication
7. Collaboration (teamwork)

Internal and external communication networks are part of the learning system used in the real projects methodology, which is collaborative by nature and depends on effective teamwork, as in communication agencies and departments. More than in other fields of knowledge, in communication aspects related to sharing, cooperating and collaborating are of vital importance, otherwise we could not even use the term communicate (from latin *communicare*, to share, to put in common).

Ways of Living in the World:
8. Citizenship (local and global)
9. Life and career
10. Personal and social responsibility (including cultural awareness and competence)
“Glocal”, meaning local applications for global ideas and innovations is key to understanding today’s business and communication. Students work in non-profit projects that benefit underprivileged people, sometimes local, other times on other continents, and in order to do their work well, they need to learn to build bridges towards intercultural understanding and global citizenship. Ours and theirs, fear of “otherness” are not terms admitted within the work teams. Working for free for the benefit of other people educates students in values and responsibility, both in personal and corporate contexts. Forming teams with students from different cultural backgrounds raises global awareness and fosters cross-cultural skills. An example of this is a student team recently formed to collaborate on a fundraising campaign for an NGO in Ghana, where the team leader role is assumed by Chinese master’s degree students and the work team formed by local (Spanish), Belgian and German Erasmus students, coordinated by African volunteer workers, and finally mentored and coached by local and Finnish lecturers.

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have shared a working methodology and some practical experiences for the teaching of “advertising related literacies” to communication school students. As ICT and communications tools and strategies are in a state of constant change, advertising education is becoming increasingly challenging. Not only are efficiency and impact required by advertising, but there is also a demand for the “right impact”, for a more responsible, credible, accurate and truthful communication with the various stakeholders with regard to the new discipline of RRI – responsible research and innovation.

In our experience, the key idea that can give some response to today’s ethical demands in the field of education in commercial communication can be found in the distinction between information, disinformation and misinformation. Beyond the philosophical discussions about “truth”, scholars mostly agree that disinformation implicitly includes the deliberate intention to give false intention, whereas misinformation is wrong, misleading or incomplete information, without the necessary intention of misleading the public. However difficult it is to find a valid definition for objectivity in communication, it is up to the team making decisions on publishing or advertising a brand to determine the degree of truth or falsity of the information included, something that advertising students must learn at an early stage of their education. Within the scope of our project, building trust is key to gaining stakeholders when it comes to NGO communication strategies based on truthful storytelling.
In our experience, action research, a socially responsible method by definition, and real social projects can work efficiently as a means of promoting advertising literacy, but a broader understanding of the concept in required and media, ICT, digital, information and some new, yet to be named near future literacies must be englobed in the project.

New media and new contents created in different formats where similarities between pure information, persuasive communication and entertainment become blurred can confuse the message and disinformation and misinformation can be easily taken as accurate information by students if they do not acquire up to date advertising related literacy. At the same time, they need to learn how to handle the user generated content they create in a proper way and how to manage citizen authorship when working for a brand in their professional future. In societally oriented communication, the rights of the vulnerable public must be guaranteed and the accuracy of information is the key to a more egalitarian society. Media and advertising students will be the future leaders in creating advertising content, information that has the potential to either foster or reduce social stereotypes and create trending topics and tendencies.

So advertising literacy is not only about being critical with the media and messages, but it is also about being informed as to how to use information and commercial communication, to understand the consequences or the social effects that it can produce. The co-creation of new media and the masses of information generated every day requires well prepared professionals and well informed citizens. The university must be able to form responsible workers, communicators for a better future, well informed and capable of generating social change. Only in this way can we move from disinformation to information in future of advertising.

Publication Bibliography


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