

# Chapter 10

## Perception Is (as) Reality

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### ABSTRACT

*It is the goal of this chapter is to explore the challenges inherent to a “post-fact” society through the lens of the school public information specialist and the library media specialist. The role of the school public information officer (PIO) has changed with the proliferation of opinion as “fact” on the internet and social media. Educating the public on all school-related matters, PIOs must be media-literate, effective content consumers and content generators, with the skills to gauge and predict the opinions of their voting public. Similarly, library media specialists tasked with educating students as consumers of information in the fast-paced, “on demand” digital age requires an understanding of their evolving role as content generators. Effective media literacy instruction encompasses more than simply using technology and electronic media in the educational setting. Rather, it begins with the understanding that students are ill equipped to critically evaluate the electronic mediums they so closely identify with.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Truth isn’t truth.” –*Rudy Giuliani (CNN, 2018)*

Media content consumers be warned: the “facts” are no longer indisputable; opinions, especially highly emotionally-charged opinions, reign supreme; and imagery devoid of context has flipped our world of knowledge-seeking knowing on its head. “Reality” is no longer immutable but rather is an ongoing summary of an individual’s perceptions, opinions, and selected data. A false balance between evidence-based facts and opinion has developed (Otto, 2016). Every individual with access to a computer and the Internet has the power to consume and distribute information—regardless of qualifications. In a post-fact society where everyone has the right to an opinion, a sea change has splashed evidence-based facts out of the pool. The leveling of consumers - of fact and opinion - has led to a communications crisis with multiple implications for readers, writers, listeners, viewers, and thinkers.

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## ***Perception Is (as) Reality***

Make no mistake: We are in a battle for the hearts and minds of the people. Perception is reality insofar as content consumers perceive and filter this reality from a host of content generators: TV and news media, social media, research, collegial circles, family and friends, religious and political affiliations, and life experiences.

The authors of this chapter present two on-the-ground media literacy perspectives: one from a public school district public information coordinator addressing the disinformation that surrounds public education; the second from a library media specialist teaching high school students to become media-savvy content consumers and responsible content generators. Further, readers can extrapolate how the issues and solutions provided here can apply across many areas of educational practice.

## **BACKGROUND**

Being “Information Age”-media literate means so much more than being tech-savvy, or having the fastest modem, a large number of social media followers, and access to a landslide of TV and radio channels. Powerful content providers using the 24/7 “breaking news” television news format, flashy websites with embedded citizen journalist videos, and real-time viewer/listener comments are not equally credible. Similarly, search engines deliver information to the online information seeker, but not necessarily in a verifiably reputable hierarchy. How frequently do readers automatically click the top item on a search page rather than scan the page(s) for the most reputable source?

The assumption that content consumers are able to discern differences among content generators and information, misinformation, and opinion is problematic. Whether the person is a student or an adult, the authors posit that the ability of an individual to be a reasonably informed content consumer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of instant, high-impact communications rests primarily on each consumer’s media literacy quotient. In other words, the more informed the consumer is in the use of an ongoing pool of diverse media, collegial discussions, and deeply reflective thinking, the higher the probability of being media literate. However, even the most informed content consumer is subject to a host of influencers, biases, and the sway of public opinion. Perception is (as) reality becomes the sum of an individual’s exposure to, and ability to judge, media content.

Much is at stake—from the contamination of the communication ecosystem to the subtle influences on each individual’s perception of reality. In the ongoing search for truth and knowledge, we want to be right. Our brains constantly weigh the pros and cons of new information as it fits or doesn’t fit into our belief system and knowledge base within a society saturated with a constant bombardment of media input. We watch, listen, compare, discuss, and process to discern a general sense of our alignment with, or disapproval of, new information. This mental structure or “schemata” helps media consumers to perceive and organize new material. As defined by Katunar (2017),

*Schemata have to be viewed both as a process and its results, and not as static entities, which in turn posits the notion of schemata as allowing both the flexibility of application and stability of a system (such as the language system) simultaneously. (p. 314)*

Often, new information that contradicts an individual’s existing belief system becomes discounted. This filter, or “confirmation bias,” describes individuals’ seeking and accepting of information that simply confirms what they already believe to be correct, truthful, and undeniable. As summarized by

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