

Episode 6: “Media literacy and the fight against disinformation”

[mix of introductory sounds]

Luís Pinto [host]: Estados do Tempo, because media literacy is a basic necessity.

[music]

Luís Pinto: Hello, in this sixth episode of the podcast, we are joined by Elton Pinheiro:

Elton Pinheiro [moderator]: But those same logics of participation, and even emotional amplification, can also facilitate the spread of disinformation — especially when stories often circulate faster than the facts themselves.

Luís Pinto: On the other side, we have Pedro Moura, in a conversation about media literacy:

Pedro Moura [guest]: We may have the best intentions in the world when it comes to combating disinformation, but if this isn't a pressing issue for audiences and in their own media practices — their media repertoires — we'll essentially be preaching to deaf ears.

Luís Pinto: Our moderator, Elton Pinheiro, regularly teaches sound and audiovisual journalism, public communication, contemporary communication technologies, and communication policies. He holds a PhD in Communication and Society from the University of Brasília, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Communication Sciences at the Communication and Society Research Centre, where he currently works as an assistant researcher. He coordinates the Ibero-American Observatory of Public Media Services and the Research Group on Production and Innovation in Sound Language, where he has conducted scientific research on sound media and their relationship with practices of information quality and integrity, as well as media literacy.

Joining us to discuss this topic is Pedro Moura. He holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the University of Minho and is a member of the Communication and Society Research Centre. His doctoral thesis focused on transmedia narratives in the everyday lives of young people, an empirical study with lower- and upper-secondary school students. His main research areas include reception studies, fandom, transmedia narratives, and media education and literacy. He is also a collaborator of MilObs, the Observatory on Media, Information, and Literacy at CECS.

Elton Pinheiro: We live in an era of information abundance. Never in history have we had so much content at our fingertips. But that doesn't mean we are better informed. In fact, we have never been more exposed to disinformation. Every day, we are bombarded with alarmist headlines, viral videos, and opinions dressed up as news. In health, for example, miracle cures spread faster than the science itself. On climate change, manufactured doubts compete with scientific consensus. And in politics, emotional and populist narratives often drown out data, context, and accountability.

To some extent, it is increasingly difficult to separate fact from manipulation. Amid this digital and virtual noise, as well as the analogue and real, one question becomes urgent: who protects us? And, even more importantly, how do we protect ourselves?

Well, this episode of *Estados do Tempo* considers that a meaningful response begins with media literacy: the ability to question, verify, contextualise, and, of course, the right and duty to seek quality information. To reflect on the importance of media literacy and access to information, we are joined by Pedro Moura, who holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the University of Minho and is a researcher at the Communication and Society Research Centre. Pedro Moura's main research areas include reception studies, fandom, transmedia narratives, and media education and literacy. He is a collaborator at MilObs, the Observatory on Media, Information, and Literacy at CECS, and also deputy editor of the academic journal *Comunicando*.

Pedro, thank you for joining us on *Estados do Tempo*. Perhaps I could begin with an invitation to reflect — or an initial provocation, in the best sense of the word. In a context marked by growing informational disorder, media literacy is often presented as an almost universally accepted antidote. From your perspective, does this concept truly

occupy a central place in the fight against disinformation? Or might we be at risk of trivialising it, of oversimplifying, let's say, a fundamentally structural problem?

Pedro Moura: Hello, good afternoon, Elton. First of all, thank you for inviting me to join you on the podcast *Estados do Tempo*. Regarding the question, it's one of those issues that keeps coming back. Media literacy is often presented as a kind of vaccine. Whenever a new moral panic arises, media literacy is often presented as the solution that will save audiences. On the one hand, media literacy is unquestionably essential; on the other, it cannot be expected to serve as a cure-all. For one thing, framing it this way makes it easy to shift responsibility away from other areas — particularly those obliged to regulate and legislate on the media and disinformation. In other words, if we place the full burden on media literacy, and therefore on audiences — because media literacy ultimately resides with the audience — we are essentially suggesting that those who govern us, and those who regulate the media, are absolved from the possibility, and indeed the duty, to legislate and intervene in the field of communication.

So, if we give media literacy the weight of a “vaccine” against disinformation, we create the perfect context for many people to wash their hands and assume that media literacy is just a fancy way of saying “we did all we could”. That, of course, is not true. That, of course, does not mean — after all these caveats — that media literacy is insignificant, far from it. Media literacy — as an attribute of audiences, shaping how they make sense of messages, and as a feature of the broader media landscape — is fundamental. Simply put... because audiences are, inevitably, a central part of meaning-making. Disinformation can only, really, take root and flourish through them if they're not... and, using a sort of reductive image, but one that's at the core of media studies... if audiences aren't equipped to deal with disinformation, it's obvious that the likelihood of it having any meaningful impact increases. The challenge, then, is to find a balance between what can reasonably be expected from media literacy and what is merely an excuse for those seeking an easy way out of complex issues — issues that require regulation and legislation against powerful interests, such as the cultural and creative industries, social media platforms, and all the spaces where disinformation tends to flourish.

Elton Pinheiro: Pedro, perhaps a challenge for the field of media literacy would be, then, in your view, to identify the demands of these different audiences because that diversity would also require different strategies, different actions, even in terms of language and reach across territories. Would that, in fact, be a genuinely challenging issue?

Pedro Moura: Yes, that is, in fact, a crucial issue for several reasons. First of all, because we need to find the right balance between what we want audiences to know and what is meaningful to them as media audiences. One example: we may have the best intentions in the world when it comes to combating disinformation, but if this isn't a pressing issue for audiences and in their own media practices — their media repertoires — we'll essentially be preaching to deaf ears. That is, we're presenting them with a question that is clearly important, one that is unavoidable today, but those receiving these efforts to develop higher levels of media literacy may simply not be interested. And the question then is: what do we do? Do we keep pushing? Or do we also try to listen to the other side? What are, for example, the issues that matter most to audiences? For instance, for young audiences. We often see research projects and awareness campaigns aimed at empowering young people to deal with disinformation. And this is, obviously, important. The problem arises when all media education and media literacy policy stops there. Why? Because outside of that, in around 90% of cases, that's what young people actually encounter in their media practices. And, therefore, if we leave that out — if we aren't also able to take on board the concerns of the audience, the people who actually need to develop those levels of media literacy — we may be preaching into the void, or, to put it another way, preaching to deaf ears. Anyway, any metaphor you want to use to say that a message is sent but doesn't arrive. And if it doesn't arrive, the effectiveness of media education initiatives that could lead to better levels of media literacy is, in fact, null. In other words, we're working for nothing. We also need, fundamentally, the humility to listen, to understand concerns. If what worries a particular audience is more closely connected, for example, to entertainment, we also need to ensure that media literacy addresses that. Now, what is the other side of the coin? It's only listening to what audiences want. Not only on our side, but also posing questions and challenging them to raise issues. This is where the balance comes in again. We need to find the right balance, which is extremely

complicated, between what we also want to do and encourage, to elevate the level of debate, and even raise macro issues that may simply not be on the audience's radar. They may be important, but they may not be immediately perceived. And the approach cannot simply be: well, since you aren't concerned with this right now, we'll ignore it. That's not the way either. So, we have to find the right balance between listening and provoking, between hearing current concerns and recognising their validity, because they are valid. But also proposing new ideas and challenging new things, when we consider what we want media literacy to be: a positive contribution to our lives and society.

Elton Pinheiro: Speaking of audiences, but moving on to the actors, I'd like to point out here, Pedro, that in Portugal there are political and regulatory guidelines for different institutions to implement actions and strategies in the field of media literacy — namely, the public service broadcaster, video platform providers, and the ERC, the Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media — which is responsible for publishing on its website a report representing the development of media literacy skills in Portugal. Associations, and so on. So, Pedro, what reflections could you share with us about the work of these actors? I would even add: those with an interest in media literacy in Portugal.

Pedro Moura: We cannot, really, ignore the activities of these actors. It is indeed true that the ERC has, over the past few years, published and supported various media literacy initiatives. And, I believe I'm not mistaken, it even has a dedicated department for promoting media literacy. It's also true that the company providing public service media in Portugal has initiatives and responsibilities for media literacy, starting with traditional figures such as ombudsmen, for both television viewers and radio listeners. All of these are initiatives, or at least have the potential to be media literacy initiatives, and they are important. And we have to recognise that importance and, especially, since we are in academia, we also need to be open to studying these initiatives. And it's not just for academia; it's also for those who implement them. We need to be able to collaborate so that, in essence, what academia brings — its specialisation, a systematic approach to producing knowledge — can be applied to these initiatives. A systematic, scientifically oriented understanding of these initiatives, so that we don't rely only on

the impressions of those organising them, which is, of course, also important in this ongoing dialogue. But also, other initiatives from private companies. *Público*, for example, with *Público na Escola*, has had, for years, a pioneering initiative in media education through schools. All of this is important. And, obviously, we gain knowledge, we collaborate, and we study.

Here, the question is: are we collaborating and studying enough to get a sufficiently comprehensive picture of what media literacy initiatives in Portugal actually look like, including the various media literacy studies carried out in Portugal? Perhaps we are, to some extent. But I would even say it's healthy for us to want to go further, to want more. To have all of this in a more integrated way, for example, more predictable, also from a practical point of view, especially when it comes to project funding. In other words, if we can establish predictable funding streams for media literacy studies, it will obviously be simpler and easier to ensure that work in media literacy is more integrated, systematic, predictable, and regular over time — longitudinal, not just one-off cases. Because when science depends on funding difficulties and the goodwill of individual researchers, it becomes difficult to achieve a medium- and long-term picture — because we end up in a pernicious logic that relies on what we can do here and there rather than a more systematic approach. Now, not to be unfair, it's clear that there are funding sources for media literacy, particularly at the EU level. Creative Europe, for example, has had a dedicated funding line for media literacy projects for some time, and we should value that. But, still, the fact that it exists shouldn't take away our ambition to want more, to propose more, to dream of something that takes us beyond what we already have, obviously, without devaluing the current landscape.

But, returning to the initial question: are the entities that are legally obliged to promote media literacy actually doing their work? Yes. Clearly, they are. And if all of us — including, and here I'm already reflecting on our own practice as researchers and educators in the field of media — if we could do more? Yes, we could. But we also need the right conditions to do so.

I'd like to find a solution to this that goes beyond simply asking for more money. Though, of course, more funding for research is always welcome. But, well, we also need to go beyond that. To form networks of people, of researchers capable of dialogue, of interaction. And, obviously, such networks do exist. But, as I say, I don't think there's

any problem — quite the opposite — in aiming for more. The fact that something already exists shouldn't prevent us from looking at the gaps and addressing them. Because if we start looking only at our own initiatives, stagnation will inevitably follow.

Elton Pinheiro: Pedro, now in even more direct dialogue with your own research and interests. In fact, I'd really like to recommend reading Pedro Moura's thesis, which is available in the institutional repository at the University of Minho, titled "As narrativas transmediáticas no quotidiano dos jovens: Estudo empírico com alunos do terceiro ciclo e do ensino secundário" (Transmedia Narratives in the Daily Lives of Young People: An Empirical Study with Lower- and Upper-Secondary Students). So, Pedro, given your work and research interests in fandom and transmedia narratives, a question came to mind. We know that these dynamics within fan communities and transmedia narratives strengthen engagement, belonging, and the active circulation of content. But those same logics of participation, and even emotional amplification, can also facilitate the spread of disinformation — especially when stories often circulate faster than the facts themselves. So, how can media literacy step in at this intersection of participatory culture and information quality? I know it's a broad question, but I'd love to hear some of your reflections on this, Pedro.

Pedro Moura: Fandom and participatory culture — well, fan studies — have, for over thirty years, tried to emancipate themselves through a, I'd say, bold assertion. That is, the fan is not an alienated person, not someone lost in a world of fiction. The fan is a critical individual. Extremely critical, first and foremost, about what they enjoy. In other words, they are the first — also because they have greater expertise within a given diegesis — to critique the direction a particular story or a specific media franchise is taking. Why? Precisely because they have a more active, critical involvement. It's also, obviously, a very specific way of looking at audiences — one that owes a lot to the choices made by researchers who shaped fan studies, starting with the idea of participatory culture — because, after all, there are many ways of being a fan. And the thesis aimed to account for that. In Portugal, the typical forms of fandom described in fan studies are clearly minority practices. They're very, very rare. In fact, in my thesis, which involved several hundred students — 417 in total in the questionnaire phase — I

practically didn't find the specific practices of creating new content, fan fiction, fan art, or whatever it might be, that are so emblematic in the Anglo-Saxon literature on fan activity. And when I did, they were clearly in the minority. This doesn't mean that the fans weren't fans. It just means they weren't fans through the lens of the literature that shaped fan studies. My approach, when designing, for example, survey questionnaires, was also to be open to other ways of being a fan. And that connects, for example, to the question of participation. What does it mean to participate? Is it just writing things? Is it just liking posts? Just sharing? Just being actively involved in a community? Or are there forms of participation beyond that? And we don't even need to go to the extreme forms some literature proposes, where participation only exists if we control the means of production. That is also a completely utopian way of thinking about participation in an all-or-nothing logic. Fan studies don't really go that far, partly because of the dialogical relationship between fans and media — it's almost a love-hate relationship. They love the content, but they are also extremely resistant. But participation also goes beyond that, especially when it comes to meaning-making. One of the main findings of the thesis is that participation also includes listening. And that seems important to me, especially for what? To avoid a kind of cacophony.

Listening might be out of fashion, but it's valuable. Listening to what other people are saying, and resisting the temptation to immediately write our own opinion without understanding what the community thinks... The concept of the public sphere begins here. It's not a physical space of idea exchange, but an abstract, idealised sphere. Just think of Habermas's Kantian inspiration. We're talking about a public sphere, a way of really understanding what public opinion is. This happens when we listen. And when we understand what's going on around us within a community. Listening, and this is one of the results I defend in my thesis, is also a form of participation. Listening to what is happening. And this also means being able to seek out those spaces. Especially fan spaces. We might not be fans who can or are interested in writing or creating more media, but we can still pay attention to what's out there. And that can change our own understanding of content, for example. It also means that if we want to participate a year from now, we have the tools to do so because we can't put this into rigid boxes. Just because I'm not participating today, and the young people I spoke to, aged 13 to 18, weren't actively creating and participating at that moment, doesn't mean they can't

take the skills acquired through listening into the future. And participate, and be able to contribute informed input to a discussion.

I had this in the conversations and interviews. While the questionnaires gave me a picture that clashed with the dictates of participatory culture to some extent, in the interviews I realised that one of the biggest fans I had could describe the organisational structure of Warner Brothers in detail, in a way that very few people — maybe even few communications students — could. Why? Because he was a Spider-Man fan. And he understood not just Warner, but also Sony and Marvel. Because he was attentive to intellectual property management issues. Now, isn't that important? Even for him, as a citizen. Understanding how these things, which might seem minor, actually function. And later, when he has to create something, intervene, participate, and do work as a student while respecting copyright, isn't that important for that work? Wasn't that, in a way, a form of participation? I'd say it was.

So, even these things that might seem a bit superfluous, because we're talking about fans, aren't necessarily so when you dig deeper, when you really get into them. And, of course, this also reveals forms of media literacy. Which isn't just — let me repeat — creating, participating, or using, but, above all, understanding. This ties into the concept of media literacy, which has been developing for some time. While my thesis isn't specifically about media literacy, it touches on it through topics like participation and fandom.

Elton Pinheiro: Pedro, this has been an excellent conversation, but I need to start steering us toward the conclusion. I'd like to hear from you and open the floor to any reflections you want to share. Here's the provocation: in all the contexts we've discussed — especially regarding these information disorders — is media literacy a form of defence, or has it become a matter of survival? I'd even go so far as to say democratic survival. And, of course, I want to leave space for your final thoughts on this conversation.

Pedro Moura: Information disorder is a very useful concept — not only because of the different forms of disinformation it identifies: misinformation, disinformation, malinformation — but also for what comes after a few pages, when it presents this Venn

diagram that has gained wide popularity. Audiences are among the agents of information disorder. This means that we, as audiences, and therefore as people who hold certain levels of media literacy, have a say. Right from the start, in how disinformation spreads. For example, whether we end up contributing to its spread or, on the contrary, helping to stop it. Right from the outset, if our trigger isn't immediate, if we don't start sharing straight away — or even share without thinking — especially when it comes to things that may be very well-intentioned. Information disorder suggests, for instance, that one dimension to consider when classifying the different forms of disinformation is intention. We may not act with ill intent, but our actions can still contribute to disinformation.

Now, media literacy comes into play here. It's not just about creating audiences who resist messages — and it's always important to note that media literacy does not suggest that we become cynical about the media. Rather, it suggests we be sceptical. That we don't take what comes across as a message at face value. In other words, we shouldn't just believe it outright, in a simplistic way.

Similarly, media literacy isn't exhausted in this immediate relationship between message and audience. Media literacy is also a way of looking inward, at our own practices. What does that mean? It means being aware of phenomena like confirmation bias. Everyone likes to be right. Everyone. It feeds the ego. And the fact that we come across some image, text, report, meme, whatever it might be, that gives us this pleasure of being right, shouldn't stop us from pausing a bit and asking whether it really makes sense.

The other day, a photograph shared by *Público* became popular, and as it circulated, it took on meanings that weren't true. The image had been taken out of context. The intention may have been entirely benign on the part of whoever shared it. But it's also a way of entering the realm of information disorder. So, we also need to always pay attention to how different media and audiences handle mistakes. Because we can all make mistakes, we can make mistakes and acknowledge them. Another issue — and perhaps this is where the difference lies — is what happens when we make mistakes. Because we might not acknowledge them, and instead insist on the error, and insist on creating alternative realities. That's when we really enter truly problematic territory. But what does this illustrate? Audiences also matter in information disorder. And that's

where media literacy can intervene particularly strongly. Not just to alert us to the different forms of information disorder that feed into disinformation, but also to remind us of our own responsibility. Because if we are aware and informed about the messages, about the media, and about how this whole media ecosystem works, then we've done our part, and we'll also be better placed to demand that those who regulate and legislate do theirs. Because we will be more conscious.

Elton Pinheiro: Thank you, Pedro Moura, for this reflection. It's been a real pleasure. And thank you to everyone listening as well. This has been another episode of Estados do Tempo, a podcast by Communitas and the BIP, the Barometer for the Quality of Information. See you in the next episode.

[music]

Luís Pinto: That's the end of the February 2026 episode of Estados do Tempo. Pedro Gaspar did recording, editing, and post-production — moderation by Elton Pinheiro. Today's guest was Pedro Moura. Curation by Tiago Estêvão. Hosted by Luís Pinto. Production by Inês Mendes.

On behalf of the team behind this production, thank you for listening, and we'll see you in the next episode of Estados do Tempo.

[closing music]

Machine Learning Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado