

CML Interview with Jason Ohler, PhD

The interview first appeared in *Connections!*, a publication of the Consortium for Media Literacy, Vol. 95, Oct. 2017. The interview was conducted by Dr. Tessa Jolls, President of CML.

Jason Ohler is professor emeritus of educational technology and virtual learning, as well as a distinguished President's Professor, University of Alaska; and Professor in Fielding Graduate University's Media Psychology PhD program.

Tessa Jolls (TJ): Jason, in your essay (published above) you explained how we as humans are hardwired to believe fake news. There's this notion of confirmation bias, but how do you see these ideas playing out in our work in media literacy?

Jason Ohler (JO): It's probably more accurate to say we're wired to believe ideas that we already subscribe to, whether they're fake or not. That is, if we hear some news that supports our worldview then we don't stop to question whether it's real or fake – we just accept it as true. The way we come at media is we tend to look for those information sources that already support our biases. It doesn't make any difference what side of the aisle you're on; this is part of the human condition. It's a phenomenon known as confirmation bias, which is just a fancy way of saying that we see what we want to see. It happens mostly in two ways.

First, we limit our input to those information sources that are supportive of ideas we already subscribe to. We can see this in the news sources we choose, the blogs we subscribe to, and so on. And second, when we hear something that doesn't support our worldview, we tend automatically to spin it, deflect it or simply reject it out of hand without considering it. If we consider it at all it's to look for what's wrong with it. The goal is not to find the truth but rather to keep our worldview intact. Once our worldview crumbles, we have chaos and the mind will do anything to avoid chaos. It's a rather amazing phenomenon that we engage in. It's not as though we listen to information objectively, and then make a decision about it. We've already made our decision before we've heard the information. It's just a matter of how we will massage what we hear to fit our previously - held beliefs. In that sense, we're all somewhat like the Catholic Church in the time of Galileo.

To demonstrate this to my media psychology PhD students at Fielding Graduate University I have them make a list of their information inputs. Any Media. Radio. Podcasts. TV. Facebook. Even their friends. It doesn't matter – whatever information sources they regularly use. They only need to spend a couple of days doing this. Then they use the objectivity of a social scientist to infer what their bias is towards the world as though they were observing someone else. Many are shocked. I mean, they're all very smart, aware people and they can't believe they're as biased as they are. Almost none of them take the approach of listening to Liberal and Conservative sources in order to compare them. They find sources that support what they already believe. It's a big aha moment for my very smart PhD students.

TJ: I can imagine. That's a really wonderful kind of exercise to go through for all of us.

JO: Yes.

TJ: Where do you help them go from there? Once they have that aha moment? What can we do to address our bias? We all share that inclination to believe what we want to believe and to hear what we want to hear. Where do we go with that?

JO: That is the \$64,000 - question, isn't it? Once you know how guided you are by your biases, most of which are invisible to you -- how do you respond? I hope what students do is find other media sources to bounce their ideas off of. A great resource for doing this is something like Google news, because it usually will provide four or five different sources for the same story.

On a good day, the stories don't just come from US news sources but also from India, Canada, the UK, and so on. It's always fascinating to me to see how people not invested in the immediate news culture in the United States respond to a news story about the United States. We know very well that an important aspect of media literacy is being able to read between the lines to try to detect what writers and editors haven't reported in a news story.

I'm not saying these are bad people. But they have only so many column inches, so to speak. When they report about an important issue or incident they have to squeeze their story into a rather short space. In the process, what they choose to eliminate or include exposes their bias. Sometimes you can read about a story from three or four sources, and you'd swear you were reading about a different event. If the story is at all controversial, it takes at least three or four sources to knit together what might be a fairly good representation of what actually did happen and why we should care about it. So, I hope my students do that and I would encourage everyone to do that.

TJ: Yes, that's a great media literacy practice because it does give us a fuller picture of the whole mosaic of reporting that covers a particular event. Yet at the same time, in regards to that mosaic, it does take time and effort to put those pieces together. We also come against the very human limitation of how much time do we have, how important is the issue to us in terms of going after that mosaic and where will it possibly lead us.

JO: Well, it all begins with a desire to know what the truth is. I'm afraid there are fewer and fewer people who put truth seeking at the top of their to-do list. There's much more a sense of subscribing to a particular "team" viewpoint. If you're a fan of a particular sports team, and there is a close call in a game, you root for your team regardless of the truth. That's fine! Doesn't hurt anyone. But when we're talking about political events and important decisions that truly affect people and their lives in important ways then rooting for your team regardless of the facts

does become important. Everyone does it - Republican or Democrat, Conservative or Liberal, or whatever, it really doesn't matter. There is so much information coming at us and the world is so confusing and overwhelming at this point, the fallback position for most people is, "Well, what's my team thinking?" If you're a Republican or a Democrat and the team is thinking a particular way about an issue, well that's the way you think about it, without actually thinking about it. To me, it's the opposite of critical thinking.

Certainly, a desire to belong to a team drives this. As does a desire to take a break from the hard work of critical thinking. We are in a time crunch. We're busy. I can't think of a better activity to spend our time on than finding out the truth about something. But understanding the truth takes time. It takes determination. In an average day, as the information comes pouring at us like water out of a fire hose, we use heuristics, and team think is a popular one that simplifies the process of decision-making for us. The price we pay is that the quality of decision-making is greatly reduced.

TJ: You mentioned the word heuristic and so certainly with media literacy, we're trying to encourage a heuristic that is geared toward a process for critical thinking. Behavioral economics experiments have shown us that there are heuristics that work against good judgment and there are heuristics that enable good judgment.

JO: As you're pointing out, be careful what heuristic you subscribe to – and one of the heuristics that may lead to poor decisions is confirmation bias. Another one is tribalism – a more extensive, visceral form of "team thinking."

The fact of the matter is we're all incredibly busy and we are overwhelmed with information and decisions we need to make. One of the jobs of the brain is to conserve energy. One of the ways to do that is to just go with your habits – no thinking necessary. If I'm going to use some form of habitual thinking, it saves me a lot of energy that I would have to spend if I were going to use critical thinking. Critical thinking takes work. It takes energy.

TJ: Yes, and it's all the more important then that we help children form habits of critical thinking from a very early age, because if it's a habit and it's ingrained, then that makes it much easier to turn to that internalized heuristic in those moments of quick decision-making.

JO: Yes. Have you ever seen Shermer's Baloney Detection Kit?
<https://michaelshermer.com/2009/06/baloney-detection-kit/>

TJ: No.

JO: He's wonderful. He's the head of the Skeptics Society. He points out -- and I completely agree with him -- that it would be great if we all had the time to check the sources of the information that comes at us, but we don't. His baloney

detection helps us with that. To me, there are two different kinds of information checking: slow and fast. Slow is better and more in depth, but takes time most of us don't have. We need to do fast information checking, in real time, if we are going to keep up with the flow of a day. People are talking to you, the news is on, and the buzz of the mediasphere comes at us relentlessly. We have a short window to decide whether we doubt something; if we don't then we buy into it, keep rolling, and pass it on as credible. What we just heard becomes part of the narrative that we share with others. I teach my PhD students all the time, check your sources. But in an average paragraph that we read in a news report, we'd need a half an hour to do that and we don't have that time. What do we look for? What are the alarms that ought to go off when you're consuming information in real time? Shermer's kit helps with that.

TJ: We can't be in denial of the fact that it takes time to check out sources and not everybody has the time. So what do you do? What do you do? This is where the rubber meets the road and where media literacy has an important role to play in preparing people for those split - second moments because we have to be prepared.

JO: Character education, digital citizenship and media literacy are all part of a genre of approaches that help us make better decisions about many things, including the information in our lives. They are unfortunately not very present in schools. I know schools are busy, but I can't think of an issue today that is more important than fake news. Every problem we want to solve in the world depends on having good information, facts, insight based on solid research. Problem solving depends on knowing the truth. Without the truth, we can't hope to move forward.

TJ: I especially like your emphasis on the role of character education, because to make good decisions, we humans have to be in touch with our values. What are they? How do they get formed? How does character get formed and how can we help parents, and teachers and any person who is responsible for character formation with children, to understand the impact that character has? How can we encourage the kind of character formation that will lead to being a responsible and ethical citizen?

JO: Character education is more important now than it has ever been. It has always been with us in some form, but has come into its own in modern times. I write a good deal about how to modernize it even further, to apply it to the digital era. In many ways, digital citizenship is a very specific focus of character education, developed specifically to deal with digital era issues. Media literacy is a foundation for digital citizenship. Media literacy is a wonderful, highly relevant application of character education. It speaks to the reality of digital youth. Media literacy provides a way to talk about ethics and values that resonate with students, and ought to be infused throughout everything we do in a K-12 environment. Unfortunately it's still seen for the most part as an interesting add-on that schools get involved with when they've got time, or when there is real

leadership that pushes for it. In 2017 going forward, it ought to be upfront. It ought to lead the discussion of what it means to be educated.

TJ: Also, one of the values that is so important in a democratic society is the value of trust. A lot of the conversation that we're having now comes to the whole issue of trust. Who do we trust? What information do we trust? Why do we trust it? How do we know? We don't want to encourage cynicism, and yet at the same time, to avoid cynicism, we have to be able to look at that issue of trust and understand it much better. When we become aware of confirmation bias, we realize that as human beings we can't totally trust ourselves, and that's part of being human. We have to acknowledge that, forgive ourselves for it, but also be aware of it.

JO: I believe it was E. B. White who said, and I'm paraphrasing, "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world or savor the world." I experience the same quandary for myself and as a teacher. How do we teach our students to be basically suspicious of everything they read, hear and see, and, at the same time, to truly enjoy the world and all that it has to offer? It's suspicion in a healthy way, in a discerning way, in a critical thinking way, but it is suspicion nonetheless. How do we balance those two? That is the dance I think, especially in 2017 and going forward, when information is so plentiful and there are so many conflicting viewpoints.

TJ: Yes. We have to keep that faith and trust in our fellow citizens, in our society, in our government, in our social interactions. Without that kind of trust, I don't believe democracy is possible. Yet at the same time, we have to have healthy debate. We have to have the skepticism. We have to have the questioning. We have to have all the discernment that we can possibly get so that we can make some good decisions. It's a tricky balance. There's no real formula for it.

JO: No, but we can certainly promote an awareness of needing that balance. We can make achieving that balance a goal. I'll tell you what I think is really unfortunate as I visit schools: we don't give kids an opportunity to just sit and think. To find that balance. It's always go, go, go. Very little reflection time.

I'm all for giving students 15 minutes to just sit and think about whatever it is that they're doing in class, whatever's in the news, whatever is important. We emphasize engagement -- and I love engagement. Who doesn't love engagement? But I'm also a proponent of disengagement. I want students to pull back from the screen, to reflect and to put everything they're doing in a larger context, to be driven by community interest and personal fulfillment, rather than simply a need to achieve. I don't see that our education systems value that very highly.

Can I tell you a pet peeve? As people get older, they develop allergies to gluten, dairy and so on. I'm developing an allergy to the statement that we need to reinvent education. I hear it all the time. Reinvent education! Hurry! Most who use the phrase don't define what it means. The reality is that if I look at what

states are telling educators to do in order to fulfill mandates to get their funding, schools are doing a good job; they are following their mandates. They don't have a mandate to reinvent education. To reinvent education, we need to reinvent ourselves. That's where it begins – with us. We need to be the voice that goes to our legislators and says, "I want something new out of education." Then schools will follow. There are plenty of studies that tell us that business and society are looking for graduates who are creative problem thinkers, collaborators, entrepreneurs and so on. But states don't demand schools pursue ways to develop these attributes. Instead, they demand schools test for skills that are at best limited, at worst obsolete, and have little to do with these attributes.

So, here is an exercise in owning the future. What if tomorrow our legislatures were to say to schools, "We have a new policy that's called 75/25." 75% of the criteria by which we judge you will be based on all the standard stuff - test scores, literacy achievement, and so on. But 25% you get to invent yourself. Each school or district would be able to define that 25%. It could be service learning, media literacy, art and design, digital citizenship – whatever they wanted. Each school could be different. They would be assessed on how well they fulfilled the mandates they invented. Then we would see real innovation in education. We aren't using our imaginations to take this incredible K12 education system we've built to go forward into a fundamentally new world. If I had that 25%, I'd lobby for my school to pursue a combination of art, digital citizenship and media literacy. But that's me.

Instead we have the Common Core. When the Common Core came out, I almost wept. Not for what it does, but for what it doesn't do. It does a great job of defining literacy as it was practiced years ago. It is disconnected from many elements of present day literacy.

The Common Core is the de facto standard for literacy and there's almost no media literacy, no emphasis on creativity, design, or what I like to call "art the 4th R." In our multimedia, transmedia world, the new baseline literacy is no longer the 3Rs. It's not just the essay and the math problem. It's the media collage, spread out over multiple channels of media distribution. And there's certainly no, what I like to call, creatical thinking, blending creative and critical thinking. Even though we know business and society are looking for other qualities of being educated, we double down on standardized tests and incomplete approaches to literacy. I've been in this business 35 years. Things haven't changed. I don't get it. Left on the table is this question: What is the role of schools in teaching students how to understand and use the media tools of the day? It is largely unanswered.

TJ: What would you like to see, Jason?

JO: What would I do if I were in charge? I'll tell you where I'd start. In addition to including the 4th R, creatical thinking, design thinking, maker spaces and other movements that are breathing life into education, I would make character

education one of the foundations of the educational process, and express that with large doses of digital citizenship and media literacy. When you get right down to it, media literacy and digital citizenship are both expressions of character. They speak to the skills that good citizens should have. They speak to how we feel our students ought to behave as people. Education is not just about creating smart people. It is about creating good, creative, wise people. We need to build education systems that will produce graduates we would want as neighbors. Good neighbors will be media literate.

These days, teaching media literacy has become more involved than it once was. There was media literacy 1.0, as I call it, and that was basically media literacy during the mass media era – TV, radio, print. We weren't making media. We were ingesting media created by giant media corporations. Media literacy 1.0 was all about developing the skills and perspectives we needed to understand the persuasive nature of mass media. The assumption was that media was always trying to sell us something – whether an idea or a cultural value or a product – and we needed to understand how they were trying to get us to buy whatever they were selling.

Fast forward a couple of decades and now we're all actually making and disseminating media, and our students are using persuasive media techniques themselves! No w what do we do? There is only one thing to do and that's help students develop "good character" because if they're going to use these persuasive tools, then we want them to use them for good purposes, purposes beyond simply achievement and personal abundance. We want them to use the new media for local and global community advocacy. They need to have those good media skills but they need to know how to be good stewards of persuasion. Character education really comes to the fore at that point. Recalling our earlier discussion about fake news - it's not just important for students to be able to detect fake news. It's important that they not create it and disseminate it themselves. These are issues of character, not technology.