Alternative Facts, Truth and History Education: an Introduction

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Critical Thinking in the Age of Emoji's
Does History Education Play a Role for Media Literacy?

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Contemplating history education has become more urgent than ever in the present political landscape. Within the globalizing historical culture we notice a combination of three phenomena: clashes over disputed national pasts, an increasing influence of populism and a staggering use of new media including the rise of fake news.[1]

In some countries the clashes have resulted in a "war of monuments" about tangible heritage in the public sphere regarding former colonial leaders, racists or failed war "heroes". In 2017 American white nationalists marched in Charlottesville to protest the city's plan to remove the statue of general Robert Lee. The march, lit up by torches and smart-phones, ended in hard violence that left one person dead and dozens injured. In the Netherlands, fierce debates are currently going on about removing or renaming objects of Dutch colonial history: monuments, statues, streets and other commemorating structures.[2] And, not surprisingly, the past plays a controversial role in the post-apartheid society of South Africa as well. In 2015, one city mayor has kicked off public dialogues on the heritage monuments.[3] Academics and activists take part in the dialogue that will give different inputs on the fate of the statues. Some participants call for the demolition of the statue of colonial leader Paul Kruger. Others emphasize that history should be respected. Interestingly enough, the idea also popped up to create a memorial park for undesirable statues.

The influence of populism and new media is evident from the way political world leaders - Trump, Putin, Erdoğan - stimulate the circulation of fake news and frozen images of the nation. They use a populist rhetoric with the aim to mobilize the masses behind their politics of intolerance towards migration and those considered to be foreigners. Their performances enhance the idea that we live in a post-truth

society, a society which acknowledges the feeling that something is true, even if it is not based on facts.[4] Public debates are increasingly framed by appeals to emotion; factual rebuttals do not matter. According to British conservative politician Michael Gove: "People in this country have had enough of experts".[5] The contempt for intellectuals and experts is a real danger to democracy. Comedian Stephen Colbert explained: "angry voters don't need a leader to say things that are true or feel true — they need a leader to feel things that feel feels. And that is why I believe Donald Trump is a leader for our times — an emotional megaphone for voters full of rage at a government that achieves nothing (…)."[6] According to Robbert Dijkgraaf, director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the current American government is conducting a campaign against science. Half of the Republicans see the universities as a corrupting influence on society.[7] Some opinion leaders also claim that the idea of truth has been undermined by scholars and scientists themselves, due to the influence of postmodernism or - what I prefer to call - post-structuralism.

All these views challenge the historical discipline and history education in particular. In the context of this introduction I make the following two statements:

1. Although we never reach "the truth" and poststructuralists rightly question the notions of truth, the pursuit of historical truth in the academic discipline and in the practice of history teaching remains very important.

2. We therefore need to support history teachers to implement historical thinking in their classes, particularly skills which focus on critically assessing sources and the exploration of multiple perspectives.

Let me start by presenting an example based on my own teaching at Erasmus University. In the Bachelor course "Historical Representation and Imagination" we study the changing meanings of material culture, rituals, re-enactments, films and video games, and we discuss the impact of visual culture on the imagination of people, how they perceive the past. Visual representations can evoke feelings of recognition, pleasure, nostalgia, anger or revenge. They can incite people to organise actions. Images have a potential mobilizing force. In that sense historical representations can even generate another reality.

In the last wrapping-up meeting of the course a week ago, one student tried to explain the meaning of the concept "historical representation" related to post-structuralism. She stated that historical representations do not refer to any historical

reality, because there is no historical reality. That was an interesting remark, it proved that she misunderstood the meaning of post-structuralism, an influential approach in the humanities and social sciences. Poststructuralists deconstruct grand narratives and the authority of historians as the guardians of the past, with the aim to expose the power of discourses. In their view language never reflects reality; it always influences the construction of knowledge. They also emphasize that presenting the "complete story" is impossible and senseless. Finally, poststructuralists advocate that scholars should clarify their starting-points and their linguistic strategies. But they do *not* deny historical reality or the establishment of facts about reality! The issue is that we have to accept that all knowledge is provisional, in the words of Karl Popper: all knowledge can be questioned, if not, then we are dealing with faith.

Now, how to respond to fake news and fake history? What can we do as historians and history educators? Is fact checking the best answer? Yes that is important, but it is not enough.

First of all, historians and history teachers need to enhance our media literacy, to be able to understand the changing online culture. Supported by information technology, manipulated stories and images of some desired past are constantly re-mediated on television, the internet, twitter and other social media, reaching millions of people. We need to know more about how students communicate daily with Facebook, whats-app, twitter and teach them that social media are no reliable source for public news. In short: valid news does not exist on Facebook, that is fake. Social media are networks where people ventilate opinions, where news is made while the sources can never be checked. What counts is the number of readers, the algorithms. Not the content! Using social media implies gathering of biased information. Although we are the ones who decide who and what to follow, the things we like and share goes into social media algorithms so that we are now more likely to see content from those sources that have that particular content and more importantly, that bias.[8] Over time, the algorithms alter the world we see. We run the risk ending up in a filter bubble where all or most of the content we see reinforces our beliefs about the world and our ideological biases. We hardly encounter other views. Social media are also vulnerable for trolls, people or groups who post inflammatory or off-topic online comments with the aim of disrupting the conversation and creating discord.[9] That's why traditional public media - newspapers, television - are much

more reliable. You can directly address the journalist who has written a report or an opinion piece, because they publish with their names.

Second, teachers must be trained in the expanding field of popular historical culture, such as augmented reality and video games.[10] For instance historical video games give the viewers the feeling that they are part of the story in the medium without any form of mediation between the medium and the viewers. It creates immersive historicity, an experience of being personally involved in a virtual world as time travellers.[11] Video games accelerate the democratization process in the making of history, blurring the boundaries between academic historians and "hobbyists", between representation and interaction by people. That's fine. But they can also blur the boundaries between critical history and myths. Immersive simulations sometimes withhold the players from checking the presented history they are playing in and from experiencing the strangeness of the past.[12] In that case there is no difference between now and then. The playful and instrumental ways of dealing with time and the growing resistance to differentiate history from the here-and-now might subvert the orientation in time and weaken the awareness of reality.

Third, we have to supervise young people carefully about the meaning of historical truth. Not in a naïve way, neither in a sceptical way. In an interview in 2016, Stephen Colbert asserted: "One of Trump's surrogates, Scottie Nell Hughes, said that facts don't matter anymore — that there are no facts. (…) That's before God said 'Let there be light' — that's absolute chaos. And that scares me. The idea that facts don't exist anymore is actually scary to me, whereas if there are no facts anymore, then there is nothing to agree upon, and so if you can't agree, you can't build anything. (…) You have to agree on the measurement of things, otherwise you cannot build anything."[13] And I would like to add, then a dialogue becomes impossible.

Facts are always intersubjectively established. They represent a provisional truth. For instance, we agree that President Kennedy has been assassinated in 1963, unless someone can prove that he died of a heart attack. Yet, there are many traces of the assassination, who were behind the killing and why, representations which are still open to interpretations coming from different perspectives. Okay. But there is more to it.

On the one hand, let us not forget, on the basis of true facts we can construct untrue stories. After all, the selection of the facts (the omission or emphasis of certain facts), the composition and the plot of the story, and the use of words with specific

connotations always imply an element of imagination and subjectivity. On the other hand, a story can be truthful despite the mixture of historical and fictive characters and events. In this respect historian Jay Winter made a very interesting distinction between "true statements" and "truth statements". The films *La Grande Illusion* or *All quiet on the Western Front* about the First World War offer "truth statements rather than true statements, though the two coincide more frequently than not."[14] They tell us truths about the Great War "even though their precise events chronicled in it may never have taken place precisely". Truth statements in this case involve the horrors of the trenches, the smells of dead bodies, the fears of soldiers in combat, not the romanticized stories of good and bad guys fighting in heroic battles. The truthfulness refer to a convincing atmosphere which is beyond just telling the facts, often including other perspectives or counter narratives on what happened. Those perspectives are not just opinions, they are based on less acknowledged experiences and neglected facts. Hence, to be able to find out the truthfulness of a narrative the exploration and identification of multiple perspectives is helpful.[15] We therefore need teachers who are trained in the didactics of history.

Luckily, since the 1990s critical thinking has been implemented to some extent into the history curricula of various countries. History teaching no longer focuses on just memorizing facts and fostering beliefs, but on the ability "of people to think historically themselves, and thereby to be able to reflect upon (and clarify) their personal as well as collective historical identity".[16] The Dutch high school curriculum nowadays includes the important key targets "continuity and change", the "distinction between facts and opinions", and the use of arguments. In the current political climate it is absolutely essential to support history teachers in further developing exactly these skills, and to find out how to integrate new media literacy in their teaching practices. In this way they can guide students in navigating the internet and other resources. The aim is that young people can discover when "lies are taken for truth", that they are able to unmask fake news, and that they can discuss various interpretations about the past, because that is what history is all about!

Endnotes

* All websites have been retrieved on February 2, 2018.

[1] Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Historical Culture: a Concept Revisited", in M. Carretero, S. Berger & M. Grever eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Mcmillan, 2017) 73-89.

[2] See https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledgebase/101-symbolic-objects-of-dutch-colonial-history-in-amsterdam-monuments-streets-and-other-structures

[3] For the conflicts on the monuments in South Africa, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ysVlTLbLTQ

[4] Jakob Tanner, "Fakt ist … Post truth politics und Geschichtswissenschaft", in K.J. Kuhn et al. eds., *Lebenskunst. Erkundungen zu Biographie, Lebenswelt und Erinnering* (Köln: Breslau, 2017) 550-570.

[5] Tracy Brown, "The idea of a 'post-truth society is elitist and obnoxious", *The Guardian*, 19-9-2016.

[6] http://splitsider.com/2017/01/stephen-colbert-vs-alternative-facts-a-lifelong-rivalry/ (July 2016).

[7] Robbert Dijkgraaf, "Vecht of vlucht", *NRC Handelsblad*, 20-01-2018.

[8] Emil Karlson, "Current battlefields in the misinformation wars", 31-1-2017 https://debunkingdenialism.com/2017/01/31/current-battlefields-in-the-misinformation-wars/.

[9] Idem.

[10] Maria Grever, "Teaching the War. Reflections on Popular Uses of Difficult Heritage", in T. Epstein & C. Peck eds., *Teaching and Learning Difficult Histories. Global Concepts and Contexts. A Critical Sociocultural Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 30-44.

[11] Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games". *HumanIT* 8 (2006) 60-89.

[12] Chiel Van den Akker, "Antiquarianism and Historical Consciousness in the New Media Age", in C. van Boxtel, M. Grever & S. Klein eds., *Sensitive Pasts. Question Heritage in Education* (New York: Berghahn, 2016) 59-72.

[13] http://splitsider.com/2017/01/stephen-colbert-vs-alternative-facts-a-lifelong-rivalry/

[14] Jay Winter, "The performance of the past: memory, history, identity", in: K. Tilmans, F. van Vree, J. Winter eds., *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2010) 11-34, 13-14.

[15] Maria Grever, "Dilemmas of common and plural history. Reflections on history education and heritage in a globalizing world," in M. Carretero, M. Asensio & M. Rodriguez-Moneo eds., *History education and the construction of national identities* (Charlotte NC, Information Age Publishing) 75-91.

[16] Andreas Körber, "Historical Consciousness. Historical Competencies - and Beyond? Some Conceptual Development within German History Didactics", *Pedocs* 2015. (www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2015/10811/pdf/Koerber_2015_Development_German_History_Didactics.pdf).