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Addressing Anthropologies of Placelessness to Fight Disinformation: An Alternative Educational Response

Konidari Victoria¹

¹ Department of Sciences of Education and Social Work, University of Patras

Correspondence: Konidari Victoria, Department of Sciences of Education and Social Work, University of Patras, University Campus, GR26504, Rion, Achaia, Greece. Tel: 00306944507379. E-mail: vickonidari@upatras.gr
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5215-0471

Abstract

This study highlights that educational responses to disinformation should shift from the preventive and compensatory focus of epistemological approaches to an anthropological approach that addresses the spatial dynamics underlying the viral spread of disinformation. A mixed-methods approach, including reflexive cartographies, elicitation interviews, the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale, and a word-association activity, is used to explore how 222 VET students from Italy, France, and Greece perceive their relationship to space. Findings from all research tools indicate that students across the three countries, with similar socio-demographic characteristics, experience aspects of placelessness. These results, combined with the power dynamics inherent in disinformation ecologies, suggest that the viral spread of disinformation may be linked to the appeal that disinformation ecologies hold for people experiencing placelessness. The importance of effectively addressing disinformation for democracy, and the challenges facing current educational responses, indicate the need to address the limitations of this study to further explore the relationship between placelessness and disinformation.

Keywords: Disinformation, Place, Placeness, Space Dynamics, VET, Mixed Methods

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, scholars have consistently emphasized that, for the first time to such a degree, the boundaries between truth and lies, facts and rumors, and reason and instinct have become blurred (Ball, 2017; D’Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2025), creating a paradox in which “the world seems to be getting less rational in an age of unprecedented information and tools for sharing it” (Pinker, 2020, p. 380). In 2014, the World Economic Forum identified the rapid spread of digital misinformation and disinformation as one of the top ten perils facing society, while the WHO (2020) noted that “fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous”.

Under these circumstances, a growing debate has arisen regarding the role education should play in tackling disinformation. The main educational responses to disinformation so far have adopted the epistemological approach, viewing disinformation as an epistemological issue. Among the works following the epistemological approach (Schmid and Betsch, 2019; Nylan and Reifler, 2019; Chinn et al. 2020; Feinstein and Waddington, 2020), Barzilai and Chinn (2020) were the ones that got into the detail of the epistemological approach by proposing four educational lenses to address the origins of disinformation. According to the authors, post-truth trends arise : a) from gaps or deficiencies in people's knowledge and skills (not knowing how to know), b) from cognitive bias and cognitive limitations (fallible ways of knowing), c) because people are not committed enough to pursuing epistemic aims and ideals and to engaging in reliable ways of knowing (not caring about truth), d) from a loss of shared epistemology and the increasing influence of alternative competing epistemologies (disagreeing about how to know).

Similarly, at the policy level, the EU (2020) highlighted the need to promote citizens' media and information literacy and critical thinking. Howard et al. (2021), in their report for UNICEF, proposed pre-bunking as an effective strategy against disinformation and emphasized the need to develop critical skills among children, even in non-digital contexts. Suarez-Alvarez (2021), in the relevant OECD report, stressed the importance of students developing autonomous and advanced reading skills, including the ability to navigate ambiguity and to triangulate and validate viewpoints.

However, research indicates that educational solutions to disinformation are limited in scope (Feinstein and Waddington, 2020; Valladares, 2022), and that current education may exacerbate the problem by failing to provide students with sufficient opportunities to develop relevant competencies (Barzilai and Chinn, 2020). Considering this, this study adopts a different perspective, arguing that educational responses to disinformation should shift focus from how disinformation manifests to where it emerges. Drawing on the viral diffusion of disinformation (WHO, 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Vosoughi et al., 2018), the study contends that disinformation creates not only new and alternative facts but also alternative ecologies. In this context, the virality of disinformation suggests that these alternative ecologies compete strongly with the actual social, economic and political realities experienced by people.

This study presents its argument as follows. First, after highlighting the link between disinformation and post-truth, it emphasizes the need to adopt a spatial lens to contextualize disinformation. Second, after drawing on the power dynamics of space, it presents relevant findings from mixed-methods research conducted with 222 fifteen-year-old VET students in Italy, France, and Greece. In the final section, the paper argues that using the anthropological lens of space and place to combat disinformation reconnects education with the issue of justice and calls for education to address students' experiences of placelessness as a complementary educational response.

2. Background

2.1 Disinformation thrives in the post-truth space

The spatial dimension of disinformation lies in its strong connection with post-truth. Post-truth is closely linked to disinformation, as it denotes both a significant phenomenon of indifference to truth and a concurrent shift in political culture, in which the norms of factual accuracy are being undermined (Newman & Conrad, 2024, p. 6). This connection aligns with an earlier definition of post-truth as a narrative disorder, describing how mass media manipulate public perception of truth by destabilizing scientific data, expertise, and established sources of information in favour of alternative facts and disinformation for political purposes (Foroughi et al., 2019). Similarly, Rietdijk (2024) draws a connection between post-truth and disinformation, emphasizing that both "undermine the self-trust of citizens" as subjects of knowledge, as well as their epistemic autonomy, causing them to question their own experiences and judgements, making these activities "very similar to gaslighting."

This link between disinformation and post-truth is fundamental because it brings forward the spatial dimension of disinformation. Jandrić (2018) was among the first to describe post-truth as an ambiguous space between truth and lie, reason and instinct. Feinstein and Waddington (2020) argued that people encounter scientific questions in

social contexts, both as members of their social and cultural groups and with other members of these groups. Therefore, if we wish to change how people engage with scientific knowledge, we must understand their social and cultural positionality. For Foroughi et al. (2021), post-truth is a space in which public opinion dissolves into a variety of narratives, voices, sounds, and noises competing for attention. As they argued, “we now inhabit a society in which social media have suddenly become spaces where different narrative ecologies emerge.”

At the policy level, the OECD and UNICEF have also adopted the spatial approach to disinformation by drawing on the concept of the ecosystem. Matasick et al. (2020), in their OECD report, argued that, beyond the public communication function, ensuring a healthy information ecosystem requires a systemic and holistic approach. Howard et al. (2021), in their report for UNICEF, emphasized that the dissemination of mis- and disinformation occurs within a complex ecosystem operating in real time, on a global scale, and populated by many different actors – human, corporate, government, and automated – meaning that responses must be multi-faceted and involve a wide range of interested parties. Most recently, the Gouëdard et al. (2022) reiterated the idea of the ecosystem, arguing that, beyond communication practices and institutional frameworks, the context in which information is shared, and spread is of key importance in the fight against mis- and disinformation. This media and information ecosystem comprises the tools and actors that help spread information (and mis- and disinformation) and influences how individuals receive and respond to content.

2.2 The power dynamics of space: place and placelessness

The conceptualization of the post-truth phenomenon under the spatial perspective brings to the front the need to consider the power dynamics inscribed in space. Starting from Foucault's (1984 [1967]) position that "we do not live in a kind of void", scholars emphasized that the "mind" is not "in the head" but in the active, perceptual engagement of organism and environment (Bateson, 1973), that space addresses a becoming subject in an imminent and becoming world (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977), that in order to constitute the world, a reciprocal relationship is required between the world and the person whose environment it is (Ingold, 2000, p.44).

Relph (1976) made a very sharp distinction between place and placeness to describe the human experience of place. According to Relph (1976, p.141), 'places are significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world'. In contrast, placelessness describes 'the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from insensitivity to the significance of place' (Relph, 1976, preface). In other words, place is when the external space becomes interior space through experience, memory and emotions (Ingold 1976, p.6). It is a significant center of "our immediate experiences of the world" (Relph, 1976, p.41), a meaningful site that combines location, locale, and sense of place (Cresswell, 2009), a "source" that provides not only "the real or logical framework in which things are arranged, but also the means by which the positing of things becomes possible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.243). Place allows one to look out at the world and grasp one's position in the order of things, is a prerequisite for power (De Certeau, 1984, p.53), serves a broader psychosocial function by anchoring people's identities and creating a sense of belonging (Preece, 2020).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study presents results from four research tools: combined findings from reflexive cartographies and elicitation interviews measuring students' sense of place, students' well-being as assessed by their responses to the Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff, 1989), and students' perceptions of society through a word association activity.

3.2 Sampling

Given that the findings presented in this study are part of a larger mixed-methods project, the sample is quite limited. The sample consists of 222 vocational education and training (VET) students aged 14–15: 79 in Italy (67 boys and 12 girls), 64 in France (45 boys and 19 girls), and 79 in Greece (49 boys and 30 girls). France, Italy, and

Greece were selected because, over the past decade, all three countries have experienced, to varying degrees, different forms of economic, security, and migration crises. Furthermore, although they differ in socioeconomic and cultural profiles, they display similar rates of early school leaving (European Commission, 2019). The age range of 14–15 years was chosen as it is the most common dropout age in these countries. The degree of urbanization was also considered, as it appears to affect each country differently. In Italy, the highest proportion of early leavers is found in cities and rural areas; in France, it is in towns and suburbs. In Greece, however, urbanization does not significantly affect dropout rates (Eurostat, 2020 a, b; 2022). Data from Greece and Italy were collected from two schools in each country, one urban and one rural. Data from France were collected from three schools in the suburbs of Paris. The schools in Greece and France are in regions considered among the poorest in each country. Although the regions where the Italian schools are located are not considered poor, the socio-demographic characteristics of the students' parents, in terms of employment status and education, are very similar to those in Greece and France. Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that to increase the information power of the sample, students of the sample also share common educational trajectories as their classes were selected because of their high number of low-achievers and students at risk of dropping out.

3.3 Ethics

To access students, one university in each country served as the point of reference for the national context. Each university identified schools with high dropout rates in their areas, and the research protocol was outlined and the ethics agreement signed with each university. Contact was then established with the headmasters of the identified schools. After discussing the research with their teachers, the schools identified classes with high percentages of weak students or those at high risk of dropping out. Informed consent forms were then created in compliance with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (revised edition, 2017) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU, 2016/679). The consent forms were translated into Italian, Greek, and French.

4. Results

4.1 Reflexive cartographies and elicitation interviews

Reflexive cartography and elicitation interviews were used to explore students' sense of place through exploring their ability to imagine a scenario of possibility in context (X, 2021). Students were given charcoal, graph paper, color pencils, an eraser for corrections, a visual code, and one hour to complete the following task: *'Use the material at hand to design a map towards your dream. From the visual code, you can use the indicators which are relevant to your trajectory.'*

The open coding analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) of the transcribed interviews resulted in the creation of two binary categories: the dream/no-dream category for the existence (absence) of a dream, and the map/no-map category for the existence (absence) of a map. Given that the focus of this study is on the component of place, we focus only on the binary category of map/no-map.

The subsequent axial coding analysis revealed three groups of students that we included in the no-map category: a) students who provided a blank document, b) students who could not use the mediators of the visual code provided to describe their trajectory, and c) students who used the mediators of the visual code in a random way that could not provide a narration of their trajectory. As we see in table 1 below, the percentages of the no-map category are similar across the three countries and highly alarming.

Table 1: Percentage of students belonging to the no-map category per country

COUNTRIES		ITALY	FRANCE	GREEC E	TOTAL
No. of students/ Percentages	Map category	35/79 (44.3%)	30/64 (46.9%)	36/79 (45.6%)	101/212 (43%)
	No-map category	44/79 (55.7%)	34/64 (53.1%)	43/79 (54.4%)	121/212 (57%)

4.2 The Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale

The Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff, 1989) was used to explore students' psychological well-being on six factors: positive relationships with others autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The SPSS was used for the analysis of the questionnaire. The reliability analysis for our sample showed good reliability for all six factors ranging from 0,71-0,78. For this study's argument, Table 2 presents the cumulative answers for agree (the "agree slightly, agree somewhat and strongly agree") and disagree (disagree slightly, disagree somewhat and strongly disagree") responses for the six factors of the Ryff scale in Italy, France and Greece.

Table 2: The Ryff Scale: Cumulative percentages of students in Italy, France and Greece.

		Positive relationship with others	Autonomy	Environment al mastery	Personal growth	Purpose in life	Self-acceptanc e
Italy	I agree	59.3%	61.5%	59.9%	70%	55%	58.8%
France	I agree	55.8%	55%	56.2%	70.7%	45.5%	52.5%
Greece	I agree	60.4%	61.8%	61.1%	70.2%	58.8%	56.7%
		Positive relationship with others	Autonomy	Environment al mastery	Personal growth	Purpose in life	Self-acceptanc e
Italy	I disagree	40.7%	38.5%	40.1%	30%	45%	41.2%
France	I disagree	44.2%	45%	43.8%	26.7%	44.5%	47.5%
Greece	I disagree	39.6%	38.1%	38.8%	29.7%	41.3%	43,2%

Table 2 shows that the cumulative percentages of students' answers in each factor are pretty similar. Except for the personal growth factor - where a relatively lower but still significant percentage of about 30% replied "I disagree" - for all the other factors, the negative answers are higher and significant, ranging from 38% to 47%, with slight variations in the three countries.

4.3 Word association

Students were asked to use up to six words to describe our society during the word association activity. Of the 222 students, 180 participated in this activity. Forty-two students did not participate because they had either changed schools or, in most cases, had dropped out. In Figures 4–6 below, we present the responses from the three population groups. In Figures 1 -3 below, we can see the word clouds created with MAXQDA 18 software of the ten most frequent words for each population group.



Figure 1: Word Association Italy. Word Cloud, level of frequency 10. (Word corpus: 146 words)



Figure 2: Word Association Italy. Word Cloud, level of frequency 10. (Word corpus: 130 words)



Figure 3: Word Association Italy. Word Cloud, level of frequency 10. (Word corpus: 122 words).

In Italy, 32 out of 61 students have a negative perception of society, six did not respond, eight have a positive perception, and 15 have a neutral position, meaning they included both positive and negative characterisations in their list of words. France and Greece show some similarities. There is only one student with a positive perception of society in each national sample, and the vast majority in both (40 out of 51 students in France and 68 out of 69 students in Greece) have

5. Discussion

5.1 Facets and narratives of placelessness

The paper argues that the above findings describe a condition marked by three facets of placelessness.

First, the no-map category, which exceeds 50% in the three countries, reveals a hybrid form of placelessness as the students could not imagine a scenario of agency of their future selves even in the imaginative space of possibility. The absence of a map, represented by the no-map category, is fundamental in the qualification of placelessness if we consider that maps not only reflect the perceived relationship of accessibility to the world (Ryan 1991, p.31; Bell and Ryan 2019) but also provide the very conditions of possibility (Pickles 2004, p.5) as they produce the world (Wood and Fels, 2008) and operate as metaphors for our relationship with it (Spencer 2011, p.72).

Second, the Ryff scale also revealed forms of placelessness similar statistically in the three national groups. Ryff (1989) defined psychological well-being as how adolescents evaluate themselves and their ability to accomplish life aspects. Ryff and Keyes (1995) asserted that objective psychological well-being consists of six domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose in life and self-acceptance. When it comes to our results, three remarks can be made. On the one hand, the percentages of students who responded negatively in the factors of personal growth and purpose in life convey an acute sense of a placeless identity if we consider that according to Ryff and Keyes (1995), personal growth describes the capability for self-development and self-actualization, whereas the purpose in life has to do with goal setting and goal achievement.

On the other hand, the high percentages of 38%-40% of students who report a lack of autonomy and a lack of environmental mastery in all groups convey a lack of free agency and lack of control of the environment. For Ryff and Keyes (1995), autonomy describes adolescents' capability to evaluate themselves with their standards and not with others' standards, whereas environmental mastery with their capability to demonstrate flexibility and adaptability. Furthermore, the percentages of adolescents who responded negatively in self-acceptance and positive relations with others convey a sense of loneliness if we consider that according to Ryff and Keyes (1995), lack of self-acceptance and bad relations with others create frustration. The results in the Ryff scale are pretty similar to the psychological attributes used to describe the exilic conditions such as loss, exile, loneliness (Cohen, 1992) and feelings of not belonging and perceived discrimination (Safran, 1991, 2007) mentioned above. This finding has similar connotations with both the no-map category.

Third, the results of word association also reflect a twofold exilic condition. On the one hand, by describing society as 'difficult' and 'unfair', all three national groups express a perceived lack of accessibility in this society. On the other hand, through the negative value of the words used, students also express their rejection of this society. If we consider that man's essential relationship to places consists in dwelling (Norberg-Schultz, 1971, p.16), that dwelling means having access to a territory (Sack, 1983) and that 'I cannot dwell in a place I do not like' (Besse, 2013, p.31) we realize that this twofold form of rejection also conveys a form of placelessness.

The above facets, if seen together, convey a shared narrative of placelessness that is common in the three national groups. Starting from the reflexive cartographies, students' difficulty in using the visual code to describe the path towards their dream reflects the absence of all three components that, according to Relph (1976, p.45), give identity to a place: absence of physical settings, absence of activities, situations and events, absence of individual or group meanings. Moreover, in addition to the above, the low level of psychological well-being and the responses in the word association activity seem to dress the profile of existential outsider that Relph (1976, p.51) described as the condition of a person who feels alienated from the space he finds himself in, separated from the people around him, and who chooses the 'self-conscious and reflective un-involvement with that space.

5.2 Addressing placelessness to fight disinformation

In summary, research findings showed that students in the sample who share three common socio-demographic characteristics (age group, VET education, and low-socioeconomic backgrounds) experience very similar aspects of placelessness across all research tools. First, the no-map category indicates students' territorial absence in the imaginative space of possibility. Second, the Ryff scale results showed that a significant number of students in the

sample experience low psychological well-being. Third, the word association activity showed that students do not feel part of the society they describe in highly negative terms.

Greene et al. (2020) argued that the problem of disinformation is globally recognised as disruptive to the normal functioning of democratic societies, economies, and political systems. However, these results indicate the need to consider that the spread of disinformation may not only cause disruption but may also reflect existing disruptions in our democratic societies, economies, and political systems.

This need is supported by previous experiences of disinformation: a) the Covid-19 “infodemic” exploited people’s most basic anxieties (European Commission, 2019b); b) the diffusion dynamics of disinformation are more pronounced for false political news than for false news in other categories (Vosoughi et al., 2018); and c) disinformation thrives most virulently in environments already marked by internal conflicts, distrust, and other divides (Greene et al., 2020, p. 12).

The above direction also aligns with Rider’s (2017) view that we should avoid the temptation to understand the post-truth condition by focusing on the lie, and that education must also emphasise that there is something we share – ‘our world’ – about which we are to think critically. It also aligns with Lewandowsky and Van der Linden (2017) argument that “an obvious hallmark of a post-truth world is that it empowers people to choose their own reality, where facts and objective evidence are trumped by existing beliefs and prejudices”. From this perspective, Lewandowsky and Van der Linden (2017) highlight that “falsifying reality is no longer about changing people’s beliefs, it is about asserting power”. Research results therefore suggest that the facets of placelessness young people experience may make the alternative ecologies conveyed by disinformation more attractive and competitive than the actual ones, and that educational responses to disinformation should reconnect “with political and economic justice” (Giroux, 2018).

Further support for the above suggestion arises when we consider that post-truth ecologies emerge in contexts marked by a decline in social capital and increased inequality within certain aspects of the socio-economic and political environment (Lewandowsky and Van der Linden (2017), during periods of societal crisis (van Prooijen, 2017), and in institutional environments characterized by mistrust (Fuller 2018; Achterberg et al. 2017).

6. Conclusion

This study contends that the spatial dimension of disinformation indicates the need to consider complementary educational responses based on the anthropological concepts of place and placelessness. Findings from a mixed-methods study in Italy, Greece, and France show that VET students with similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds experience aspects of placelessness. These results suggest that, beyond the epistemological aspect of disinformation, its viral spread can be linked to the competitiveness and appeal of alternative ecologies of belonging that provide a sense of place. This approach further indicates that combating disinformation is closely connected to education’s efforts to address inequality and disadvantage.

Regarding the limitations of this study, it has to be noted that this study employed mixed research methods, providing rich contextual insights into the issue of placelessness but with inherent limitations for generalizing the results. Although the direction these findings suggest is consistent with previous research, the argument would benefit from larger student samples, including students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, comparative studies across more countries, and longitudinal designs.

Finding alternative educational responses to disinformation is crucial, given the limitations of the epistemological paradigm, the threats disinformation poses to democracy and social cohesion, and the pivotal role adolescents play as multiplier agents within their families and local communities.

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