

## Revisiting *Paradoxes of Media and Information Literacy: The Crisis of Information*.

by Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin

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New foreword for the Spanish-language translation: Haider, J. & Sundin, O. (2026). *Paradojas de la Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional : La Crisis de la Información*. (Translated by Fernando Bolaños and Camila Rasse) Universidad del Desarrollo. Facultad de Educación. CIMA  
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As we approach 2026, amid deepening political conflicts, wars, an increasingly AI-infused digital infrastructure, and an ongoing merger of big tech and authoritarianism, the issues we addressed in our book (Haider & Sundin, 2022) have become even more apparent. In the book, we use media and information literacy as a lens to interrogate the crisis of information and pose two broad questions: How is media and information literacy imagined having this unique power in responding to the crisis of information? Is media and information literacy even possible in an age of largely invisible algorithms and increasingly invisible information systems? We appreciate the opportunity the translation of our book offers to reflect on the book's topic in light of the four years that have passed since we wrote it.

A quick note before we proceed, a lot of our examples are from the US, but similar tendencies can be observed across Europe, South America and other parts of the world, with Sweden, where we write this, unfortunately, being no exception.

We wrote most of *Paradoxes of Media and Information Literacy: The Crisis of Information* in 2021, a year shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic and marked by intersecting crises of democracy, climate, health, and trust. We argued that these were not isolated but deeply entwined with each other and the digital information infrastructure and associated conflicts over ownership and control. The specific algorithmic logic driving social media and other platforms amplifies misleading and false content, as well as conspiracy theories. Thriving on emotionalisation, fragmentation and bad faith arguments, they undermine the already fragile conditions for building trustworthy and inclusive institutions and knowledge infrastructures for pluralist societies, which are important foundations of liberal democracy. We called this a crisis of information, invoking the Greek term *krisis* (κρίσις), signifying a turning point in a condition that has developed over time, for better or worse.

Four years on, is it still justified to speak of the situation as a crisis, a turning point, or have we moved beyond this stage? And if so, how should we best describe and engage with such a post-crisis situation?

The number of democracies worldwide is in decline (Reporters Without Borders, 2025), the world is on track for catastrophic climate warming, and most planetary tipping points have been crossed (Sakschewski et al., 2025). Antibiotic resistance and a changing climate make future pandemics both increasingly likely and more dangerous (Burnham, 2021). The international order, developed after World War II, is unravelling; its institutions are being defunded and delegitimised. Political scientists warn that the United States is veering towards authoritarianism (Stockemer, 2025), with its government legitimising conspiracy narratives that were only recently considered fringe. In fact, some conspiracy theories – for example, those concerning vaccines, climate change, and immigration – have in recent years moved to the centre of power, expressed through politics and enshrined in policy. Institutions and research initiatives aimed at curbing the spread of misleading and false information have lost funding.

The final chapter of our book refers to a documentary film with the name “Vaccine Warriors”. The film follows the activities of anti-vaccine campaigners, in the US and Europe. We describe their ways of working as building structures for unpacking and reassembling established, recognisable mechanisms for creating, disseminating and verifying knowledge as well as trust, with media and information literacy playing a strategic role and well-devised role. The strategy was successful and many of these campaigners’ goals have been achieved, at least for now. As we write this new foreword in November 2025, the US *Center for Disease Control*, has updated their vaccine advice. The health agency of the most powerful and wealthiest nation on Earth now discourages parents from vaccinating their children by echoing disproven, conspiratorial claims about the connection between childhood vaccines and autism. It is tempting to describe this sequence of events as a literal deadly weaponisation of media and information literacy.

Meanwhile, Big Tech has distanced itself from earlier half-hearted attempts to moderate hateful and deliberately misleading content on its platforms, adopting a more aggressive and masculinised rhetoric in efforts to appease the far right in the US. Democracies across Europe, South America, and other parts of the world are witnessing similar developments, increasingly supported by US officials. Our book examined how media and information literacy is believed to mitigate the crisis of information, focusing specifically on the often-conflicting roles that various actors and interests assign to it. In this context, the political and cultural shifts occurring in the U.S. are particularly significant, given the country's historic geopolitical importance, military and economic power, cultural sway, and the fact that, aside from China, most major tech corporations are headquartered there.

In this volatile political landscape, a particular form of so-called artificial intelligence, shaped by Big Tech’s extractivist logic, corporate expansionism, and disregard for accuracy, justice, and accountability, has emerged, worsening an already challenging situation. A significant development with far-reaching consequences since 2021 has been the public release of generative AI models and applications by corporations and entities such as OpenAI, Meta, xAI, Google, Microsoft, and DeepSeek. For those not involved in machine learning research or critical algorithm studies, this was entirely new and

fascinating. However, what initially appeared to many as a magical knowledge machine soon proved to be a “stochastic parrot” (Bender et al., 2021). Nevertheless, governments and other public entities have succumbed to the hype surrounding this technology, hastily implementing desperate measures to engage in a geopolitical race in a field where efforts should be directed toward greater collaboration, rather than competition.

Generative AI is used not only by everyday users but also by actors seeking to distort the digital infrastructure and undermine democracy and liberal society. Concerns have arisen regarding targeted efforts by malicious state actors to infiltrate both digital infrastructures and large language models themselves (Chatterji et al., 2025), alongside an increased risk of evidence hacking (Haider et al., 2024). The integration of generative AI into web search engines, particularly through Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) for allegedly summarising search results, has introduced additional challenges. The technique effectively outsources both quality control and the analysis of content and relationships between sources (Sundin, 2025), which are all fundamental elements of media and information literacies, regardless of how they are understood.

In our book, we discussed five paradoxes of media and information literacy, each helping us to interrogate a specific aspect of the crisis of information: responsibility, normativity, trust, temporality, and neutrality. Re-reading what we wrote in 2021, we find that, despite recent technological and geopolitical developments and policy changes, our overall arguments still hold. If we adopted a cynical approach, we could be pleased, but as should be clear from the preceding paragraphs, we are anything but. Developments since then have increased tensions, worsened an already dangerous volatility of information, and introduced new layers of complexity. At the same time, by sharpening the paradoxes, some aspects, especially different actors’ values, stances and mutual relationships, have also become clearer.

**Responsibility:** The question of where responsibility for dealing with the volatility of information is placed is intimately tied up with the question of where responsibility for securing a stable reference point for common public knowledge is situated, as well as with who can be held accountable and how. Media and information literacies, almost by definition, locate responsibility with people, albeit in varying roles. The issue is marked by tensions between different ideals, casting people as either informed citizens or rational consumers of information, as members of collectives or as acting solely in their personal interests, as sceptical or pragmatic evaluators. Above all, the issue is defined by a divide between control over society’s dominant knowledge infrastructures and people’s actual opportunities and resources for enacting their responsibilities. In short, responsibility for information control is in the discourse of media and information literacy most often placed on individuals, whether as citizens or consumers, but since they have extremely limited means to participate in shaping the very (infra)structures within which they act, accountability remains unclear. Recent developments in the integration of generative AI into already underregulated corporate, and now authoritarian-aligned, information

infrastructures continue this trend, but the speed at which it is happening makes the problem even more acute. As conversational agents (so-called chatbots) become the dominant interface for engaging with information, the underlying points of reference or sources become increasingly invisible. This, in effect, widens the divide between responsibility and accountability, as well as between the roles of citizens and consumers, to a degree that seriously calls into question not how, but whether democratic societies can function, let alone thrive, on top of corporate information infrastructures.

**Normativity:** The policy discourse surrounding media and information literacy, shaped by a network of international organisations (e.g., UNESCO, IFLA), national institutions (e.g., news media, libraries, schools), and professions (e.g., teachers, librarians, journalists), has assumed liberal democracy as both an unquestioned goal and a stable foundation, presenting media and information literacy as detached from politics. In addition, there also exist an instrumental version of media and information literacy, focused mainly on specific skill sets, usually as goal-directed uses of digital tools. More recently, the general population's engagement with AI applications is often described in such a way. For example, the European Union's AI Act, which includes a specific provision for AI literacy (Article 4), largely advances this notion. Meanwhile, theoretical understandings of media and information literacy discussed in the research literature often stress the need to understand media and information literacies as contextual, situated, and plural (literacies). The question, then, is what role values and norms play, and more specifically, whether enacting media and information literacy requires a foundation in democratic values, or if it is simply a choice amongst many? As we argue in our book, there are many examples of groups in society demonstrating very high levels of situated or skills-based media and information literacies while, in fact, working against democratic values and seeking to undermine democratic institutions, norms, and practices. If anything, the time since we wrote the book has repeatedly demonstrated this. Values and norms are constantly evolving, or rather, are continuously being negotiated, shaped, and enacted. As a sign of the times, we observe that democratic values and international collaboration are being replaced by narrower national interests, particularly national security, preparedness, and defence, with implications for how media and information literacies are – and even can be – conceived and the values with which they are fused.

**Trust:** As fundamentally social practices, common and, to some degree, shared trust is a prerequisite for media and information literacies to be meaningful. At the same time, complete, unquestioned trust renders media and information literacies futile, just as total distrust does. As we know, shared and common trust is conditioned on various social and societal agreements on what institutions, methods, systems, knowledges and ultimately values are accepted and shared between members of a community or society. As these agreements and their ultimately political arrangements are eroded, the conditions for, and also the reason to trust fade away, and with them the very basis for media and information literacies, at least when connected to ideas of deliberation, democracy, or social responsibility and, not least, shared knowledge. The tensions arising from the varying

interpretations of trust and of how trust should be scaffolded have become increasingly evident over the past few years. New arrangements emerge, but so far, and perhaps necessarily, these are fragmented, further increasing tensions.

The contextual aspect and the significance of the moment cannot be overstated. The demise of the rule-based international order, despite its undeniable shortcomings and injustices, accompanied by major democracies toying with authoritarianism, profoundly affects the rationale for trust. So does the rise, or more precisely the aggressive promotion, of generative AI, along with the proliferation of synthetic content and a deskilling of knowledge work. Needless to say, the widespread presence of deepfakes and other forms of fabricated content on social media and other platforms makes trusting what we see and hear harder still. However, the most significant danger is that a collective questioning of the very possibility of trust and trustworthiness itself takes hold, undermining the basis for creating shared understanding and meaning: if anything can be fabricated, then everything can also be contested on the exact same premise. This greatly strengthens plausible deniability as a strategy to evade accountability and is further reinforced by persuasive responses generated by sycophantic AI applications programmed to satisfy customers with agreeable and affirmative language. The integration of Big Tech AI into digital infrastructures risks accelerating and extending the deskilling of crucial elements of media and information literacies, almost regardless of how they are defined. Web search engines, as well as research databases, increasingly incorporate so-called AI features for allegedly summarising retrieved documents.

**Temporality:** In our exploration of the various ways in which media and information literacies are shaped by different, often contradictory understandings of time, diverse temporalities, as well as a pervasive social acceleration of time, we identified a complex temporal paradox. In particular, we highlighted a tension arising from the relationship between media and information literacy and information avoidance, which serves as a specific means of information control, established through notions of time and temporality. A tension emerges that is characterised by incommensurate imaginaries, rendering media and information literacy both necessary and insufficient, demanding full immersion alongside constant self-restraint, and contributing to society's persistent acceleration and progress while simultaneously playing a role in efforts to slow the pace of life. It has since become increasingly evident that, from both policy and educational perspectives, media and information literacy is not merely a moving target; rather, it is more aptly characterised as the arrow and target rolled into one, yet changing and moving at different paces. The rise of corporate generative AI and the erosion of the postwar international order bring certain aspects of the temporal paradox we previously described into even sharper relief. On the one hand we experience an extreme acceleration of society and a literal takeover of accelerationist ideas in the halls of power. On the other hand, we also experience a violent backlash in relation to rights of minorities, environmental governance, and so on. In a sense, this adds a new dimension to what we previously called a temporal paradox. The simultaneous occurrence of acceleration and backlash inevitably

affects how media and information literacies can be conceptualised and realised but also how they can be criticised and resisted.

**Neutrality:** When developing the notion of a neutrality paradox, predominantly by drawing on an example from Sweden, we discussed how certain approaches to both refute and idealise media and information literacy are better understood as intentional furthering of distrust in democratic institutions, destabilising established forms of expertise and also of contestation. Paradoxically, the portrayal of media and information literacies as non-political and existing beyond ideology by the institutions of liberal democracies was instrumental in making this possible. Redefining the notion of neutrality to correspond with what is sometimes described as a false balance is a persistent strategy in such a repurposing of media and information literacy. The discussion remains relevant, as the idea of neutrality has become even more weaponised by political forces since then. Other, related concept have been appropriated and repurposed in comparable ways, among them, diversity, human rights, free speech, and academic freedom. Attacks, particularly from the far right, on knowledge and information institutions for allegedly not being 'neutral' undermine the very foundations of media and information literacy. Calls to give obvious falsehoods equal space, a false balance, make neutrality a constantly shifting target. Not least, generative AI applications have been accused of being "woke" and too "liberal" by the political far right. In the name of fighting bias, for example, the current US administration has issued an executive order explicitly against what they call a *diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ideology*", where neutrality fulfils an important role: "LLMs shall be neutral, nonpartisan tools that do not manipulate responses in favour of ideological dogmas" (Federal Register, 2025, p. 35390). A similar weaponisation of neutrality has been evident in, for example, the banning of books in school libraries, in the content of both commercial broadcasting companies and public service broadcasters, as well as in the far-right criticism of Google Search.

**Infrastructural meaning-making:** In the book, we discuss the notion of infrastructural meaning-making to situate media and information literacies within an increasingly complex and corporate digital infrastructure, consisting of competing platforms, algorithms, and flows of data. However, understanding and creating meaning within this hyper-capitalist digital infrastructure becomes more difficult, especially as one of its main characteristics is its increasingly seamless embeddedness in the social practices of everyday life, making it hard to notice and therefore difficult to critique, control, or resist. The introduction of Big Tech's version of generative AI over the past four years has made developing media and information literacies more relevant than probably ever, and it has certainly brought to fore how dependent different forms of meaning-making are on the infrastructural conditions within which they are situated. Meanwhile, the resources needed for critical media and information literacies, as well as the reasons for their necessity, are increasingly outsourced to search engines, AI agents, and other algorithmic systems and hidden beneath layers and layers of deceptive convenience.

We want to conclude this foreword with a final reflection. It should be increasingly obvious, but is strangely rarely mentioned, that without the opportunity to *refuse*, no literacy can be considered critical. This is not new, but there is growing urgency to demand, above all, not explainable, inclusive, transparent, ethical, or even just, but refusable information infrastructures, including refusable artificial intelligence. If the notion of *krisis* indicates a turning point, then, at least regarding the crisis of information, what we are experiencing may better be described as a post-crisis situation, where another Greek term is more fitting: *stasis* (στάσις): a state of stagnation, and, historically, civil conflicts. We leave this with a question mark. While the challenges we identified in 2021 have intensified, whether it is a crisis or already something else is for the future to decide. Wikipedia, a living monument of the old internet, extremely important to preserve, has entries on both terms (Wikipedia, 2025, June 8; Wikipedia, November 11). We encourage you to visit them, read, edit and create shared meaning for a common information infrastructure.

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